Being Young, Male and Muslim in Luton

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According to Olivier Roy (2004), young Muslims, particularly in diaspora, are being increasingly attracted to what he refers to as ‘globalised Islam’. He argues that they are resisting the segregationist narratives of the modern nation-state. At the same time, they also resist the unfamiliar customs and expectations of their migrant families by overtly valorising religious identity and consciously associating with an international collective of co-religionists. Roy contends that the combination of globalisation, westernisation and the increase in worldwide Muslim diasporas has led to a reimagining of the international Muslim community (ummah). A global Muslim can mean either:

Muslims who settled permanently in non-Muslim countries (mainly in the West), or Muslims who try to distance themselves from a given Muslim culture and to stress their belonging to a universal ummah, whether in a purely quietist way or through political action. (2004:iix)

Second and third generations in diaspora are particularly attracted to the doctrines of globalised Islam due to the fact that they are ‘de-territorialised’ from the Islamic heartlands. Moreover, they are attracted to this form of Islam due to the alienating cultural proclivities of both the host community and particular non-Islamic cultural preoccupations of preceding generations. Thus the appeal of being a member of the ummah, united by a common belief that transcends race, ethnicity and nationality is particularly powerful. In the post-colonial world, the ‘ummah no longer has anything to do with a territorial entity’, but now must be ‘thought of in abstract or imaginary terms’ (2004:19 my emphasis). The egalitarian doctrines of Islam provide a comforting antidote to experiences of racism and social exclusion which are now part of everyday life in the West for
Muslims. Moreover, the notion that Islam is no longer fixed to a particular geo-political space adds substance to the doctrine of *ummah*, particularly among those who are living in diaspora communities.

Muslims in diaspora are also captivated by the notion of a ‘glorious Islamic past’ promoted by various reformist thinkers and groups – the idea that Islam and Muslims once spawned a great civilisation notable for its conquest of vast lands, its contribution to the arts and sciences, and responsible for the spreading of the religion to distant and remote places around the world. This pursuit for a ‘pure Islam’, devoid of polluting cultural influences, is consistent with the phenomenon of ‘deculturalised Islam’:

The construction of a ‘deculturalised’ Islam is a means of experiencing a religious identity that is not linked to a given culture and can therefore fit with every culture, or, more precisely, could be defined beyond the very notion of culture […] The new generation of educated, Western born-again Muslims do not want to be Pakistanis or Turks; they want to be Muslims first. (2004:22–5)

Although Roy’s argument implies an effective rejection of established state narratives, it nevertheless does not suggest that young Muslims prescribing to a ‘globalised Islam’ will necessary evolve into terrorists. Rather, that young Muslims are re-appropriating their faith by challenging culturist approaches to the religion espoused by previous generations. At the same time, recourse to an abstract global community of Muslims reconciles perceived race and class disparities in their home nation.

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Islam played a significant role in the lives of all of my informants. Everyone whom I met valued and prioritised their ‘Muslim identity’ above all else.¹ What this identity specifically meant varied from person to person but most were keen to show pride in their religion and solidarity with their co-religionists, both at home and abroad. This sense of belonging to an abstract creed (*din*) and imagined community (*ummah*) was one of the most prominent and powerful ontological forces shared by Muslims in Luton. Even so, there appeared to be a marked difference between the generations. Older men whom I spoke with agreed that Islam played a crucial role in their lives. Among the most avid attendees during the five daily congregational (*jam‘aat*) prayers at the mosques, were men of retirement age or those approaching this age. Many such men claimed
that they had worked hard all of their lives precisely for the privilege of being able to ‘turn to God’ in retirement and therein make amends for the mistakes accrued throughout a lifetime. It was also common for many older men and women to perform the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca once they retired and were financially secure. Becoming ‘religious’ in old age, when family and work pressures relatively subside, was almost customary and expected of the older generation. However, this trend is shifting. More and more young people in Luton were turning towards religion and a pious lifestyle. Moreover, young people were seemingly more attracted to reformist and revivalist variants of Islam than the traditional folk variants associated with South Asian Islam. These stressed the universalistic and ‘de-cultured’ expression of Islam, as Olivier Roy suggests, rather than the ethno-religious or localised variants that the older generation practised. The majority of my British-born informants claimed that the ‘village Islam’ espoused by their parents or grandparents was ‘backward’ and inauthentic, and that they couldn’t relate to it.

Luton has a varied and diverse Muslim community. The town’s twenty-five mosques catered for a number of sectarian, ethnic and kinship-based congregations. Some are mostly frequented by those of Bangladeshi origin, others by Shia Muslims or the Salafi community and so on. Some of my young informants told me that they experienced pressure from home to only attend those mosques where members of their extended family and clan (biradari) made up a significant portion of the congregation, and/or where they controlled the mosque committee. Even though most Muslims attended their preferred mosque most of the time, there were some for whom attending a mosque was a practical choice more than anything else. They might choose to attend the closest mosque for example or, notably, mosques where the imam spoke English. This latter point, and its concomitant implications, is crucial for our purposes in this chapter. Many young men with whom I spoke, harboured a mistrust for imams who were unable to speak English and could not explain the religion to them in a discernible manner. The Friday sermons (khutba), one of the distinguishing features of the widely-attended Friday prayer services (jum’ah), were given in either Bengali, Urdu or Arabic at most of the mosques in the town. The notable exception was the Salafi mosque. Some imams would on occasions embellish their speeches with some English commentary but, for the most part, English was a secondary language. Moreover, guest speakers would often be invited from South Asia or other parts of the Islamic world to give lectures and speeches, the vast majority of whom did not address the congregation in English. However, such events were, by and large,
organised with the older generation in mind and consequently very few young Muslims would attend. In contrast, the Salafi mosque employed a policy of addressing the congregation primarily in English. On occasions where a guest speaker (many of whom came from Saudi Arabia) could not speak English, his speech was translated live by a supporting mosque official. Consequently, the Salafi mosque boasted a much higher percentage of young people from different ethnic backgrounds within its congregation than any of the other mosques that I attended.

In addition to the problems with communication at mosques, young people also complained about the ‘magic’ and ‘superstition’ associated with South Asian folk Islam. Many of my informants felt practices and rituals performed at these mosques, particularly those associated with the Barelvi Sufi sect, were cultish and cultural, rather than anything associated with the ‘pure’ teachings of the Qur’an or the practices of the Prophet Mohammed. Barelvi Sufis are particularly devoted to the Prophet Mohammed, arguing that he is still alive and present (hazil/na-zil) in the world. In most Barelvi mosques, a vacant chair is placed at the front of the prayer hall during prayer times to indicate that the Prophet is also praying with the congregation. This doctrine was fiercely defended by the older generation and other committed Barelvi Sufis, especially in light of the persistent attacks from revivalist sects like that of the Salafis. To almost all of my young informants, this ritual was irrational and based on superstition rather than reference to proper Islamic scripture. They claimed that such practices were for uneducated, rural Muslims in South Asia. In a sense, debates around the clash between sober ‘scholarly’ Islam and syncretic ‘folk’ Islam are not new, and anthropologists have been keen to highlight this apparent theological tension in the Muslim world for quite some time. More recently, others have argued that Sufi orders have resisted and survived the disenchantment of modernity and adapted their practices to suit the times or witnessed a growth in their congregations as a consequence of it. However, whatever the anthropological literature suggests, in Luton there was an apparent chasm between those who were born there and those who were not. More and more young Muslims were rejecting the folk Islam of their parents and grandparents, and relating more to the literate, puritanical Islam of the reformists. They were not doing this without encountering problems. Similar to the insights garnered by Samuli Schielke among young men in northern Egypt, Luton’s young Muslims likewise struggled to live pious lives ‘according to the book’. Nevertheless, unlike Schielke’s informants, Islam also formed the basis of nascent political identities for
young Muslims in Luton that I suggest are symptomatic of an emerging generation of Muslims living in the contemporary West, and native to it.

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Even though revival or reform Islam appeared to be most attractive to my young informants, the institutional presence and influence of traditional South Asian Sufism remains strong for the time being. As I have mentioned, the majority of the mosques remained firmly in the hands of the ‘elders’ (exclusively men). This meant that community elders recruited imams, ran the associated seminaries (madrasas), were responsible for estates and maintenance, and organised religious and cultural events. Thus all religious learning and services very much remained in the control of the older generation (apart from the Salafi Mission, which I shall return to later).

Growing up, all of my informants attended the mosque for congregational prayers, religious festivals and seminary school – where they were taught how to perform the daily prayers (salat) and other important rituals, in addition to learning how to read the Qur’an in Arabic. Young boys and girls of schooling age were regularly packed off to the mosque after school and on Saturday mornings. This was a practice taken directly from many parts of the Islamic world, not least South Asia. For many, the experience of attending lessons at the mosque made an indelible impression. It was seldom positive. They complained of being regularly beaten by the imam if their work (sabbak) was unsatisfactory, if they misbehaved or even when the imam ‘just felt like it’.

The imam used to make us memorise the Qur’an and practice namaz [daily prayers]. He couldn’t speak English, and only spoke to us in Urdu, which a lot of us didn’t understand. Also, he never explained to us what any of the Arabic meant. We were just expected to memorise it all. For a long time I thought that was it, that was all Islam was – praying and memorising the Qur’an […] Actually, it put me off Islam [for a bit] because when we didn’t get our sabbak [daily tasks] right, we were beaten and told we would go to hell if we kept getting it wrong. Now though, I’ve found out what Islam is really about by speaking to older cousins and people at the mosque, and reading books about Islam in English.

– Abbas, 18, A-level student
Abbas’s account of his experiences of madrasa were typical. Corporal punishment was a common pedagogic practice that most parents approved of. Moreover, chapters of the Qur’an were learnt by rote in Arabic, without translations or commentary on complex concepts and verses. Imams, more often than not brought over from South Asia for low salaries, could not speak proficient English and thus could not relate to their students. Despite this, however, and quite surprisingly, Islam remained important to many of my informants’ lives in adulthood. Abbas, who claimed he was ‘put off’ Islam, argued that his experiences were just the product of being taught in a Pakistani way and that future generation should be taught differently:

In Pakistan, this is how they learn about Islam […] They know Urdu, so they can ask questions and get a better understanding. But here, most of us weren’t interested in going to the mosque after school, and when we [were there] our questions never got answered because the iman didn’t care or we couldn’t understand him […] We should get taught about Islam by people who can speak English, so we can understand our religion better.

Abbas didn’t harbour any lasting antagonism towards Islam. In fact, he was making concerted efforts to indeed try to understand the religion better. Like so many other young men in the town, he was attracted to the Salafi Mission and, in particular, to the preaching of Khidr. He was a regular attendee at the mosque for Friday prayers and also came to events and lectures organised by the mosque. He especially enjoyed Khidr’s lectures and sermons because, he claimed, Khidr was from Luton and spoke perfect English as well as perfect Arabic. Abbas also felt Khidr wasn’t a hypocrite, but a kind, sincere and pious man, making huge sacrifices for the sake of his religion. Despite this, Abbas was not quite sure whether he himself was a Salafi. ‘It’s a big thing, a lot of hard work’, he told me. ‘I’m not sure I can be like that, but hopefully one day’. Abbas was concerned that the austere discipline and abstinence required to fully ‘practise’ Salafism was beyond him for the time being. He also claimed that he didn’t quite possess ‘knowledge’ about Islam, and that he was still re-learning all the basics. Coming to the Salafi mosque, therefore, was a means to re-educate himself about Islam. Being ‘pious’ and one day like Khidr clearly appealed to him, however. More so, it seemed, than emulating the religious teachers of his childhood.

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Zulfiqar was an IT consultant in his mid-twenties, who often visited his friends at the MSP offices. He wore a very large black beard, along with a long white Arabian-style thobe to work (even in winter). Zulfiqar also owned a selection of the attars (perfumed oils) produced in Saudi Arabia. Whenever Zulfiqar was in the office, a pungent waft of his chosen scent for the day circulated the building. On occasions, this was oppressive. He claimed that wearing attar was ‘sunna’, something that the Prophet did and encouraged. Salafi Muslims are particularly keen on Prophetic mimetic for them, like most Muslims, Mohammed was the living guide on how to live one’s life according to the ‘Book’. However, Salafis adopt a literal meaning to this, arguing that everything that the Prophet did should be emulated as he did it, regardless of the rational, logical or practical problems that this may cause. Zulfiqar’s choice of fragrance, therefore, could be seen as an act of piety and religious obligation (rather regrettably for the rest of us). But this mimesis as an act of piety was a certainty from his point of view. When I asked him if he had ever ridden to work on a camel, as the Prophet did, he replied: ‘The scholars have said that the car is halal, Ashraf’. Then, after a slight pause, he chuckled: ‘maybe we can order one for lunch?’ Zulfiqar was a devout Salafi Muslim. He prayed five times a day, almost all of which he performed at the mosque during the congregational hours. He was a regular at the dawn (fajr) prayers, which in the summer months meant waking up around 3am. During Ramadan, he would fast the entire month in addition to his daily prayer routine. Then, when Ramadan finished, he would continue holding the voluntary (nawafal) fasts after Eid because ‘the Prophet recommended it’. It is also said to be Prophetic tradition to fast on Mondays and Thursdays, precedents that Zulfiqar often also observed. He had been to Mecca on the Hajj and the minor (Umrah) pilgrimages several times, the first as a child. He paid his obligatory religious alms (zakat) promptly every year, he never took nor received interest in any form nor did he socialise with any unrelated women (mahram, i.e. socialising only with wife, mother, sister, daughter, niece). He was also friendly, well-meaning and light-hearted.

Zulfiqar had not always been so piety minded, however. Like Abbas, he was disenfranchised by the ‘village Islam’ of his parents. He was yet another Muslim of his generation that was highly critical of the madrasa religious schooling system, arguing that it needed serious reform. Zulfiqar claimed that he had not learnt anything of note at madrasa, beyond the act of reading Arabic and memorising chapters of the Qur’an. He argued that there was no intellectual development, and that important and classical Islamic subjects such as language (lugha); history (tarikh); law (kanun); jurisprudence (usool-ul-fiqh); creed (aqidah); theology (kalam)
and methodology (manhaj) were not taught to students at the madrasa. For Zulfiqar, this lack stunted the progress of students and their knowledge of Islam. Furthermore, he noted that his teachers could barely speak English and couldn’t adequately explain the complex meanings of the scripture. He didn’t know it at the time but, looking back, he felt that he was completely misguided by his religious teachers growing up. His attitude towards the religious learning he gleaned from his family did not fare much better. ‘They just wanted me to pray, and fast, and stay away from girls’, he declared. ‘They didn’t really care about gaining knowledge of the din [religion]. It was all about being a good, sharif [respectable] boy’. Zulfiqar’s parents maintained close ties with Pakistan and loosely followed the Berelvi sect. Despite this, they were not zealous, and encouraged their children to be good, God-fearing Muslims above any sectarian loyalties or allegiances. Consequently, Zulfiqar’s conversion to Salafism in his adulthood (or ‘reversion’, according to him), did not cause tensions in his relationship with them. This is because the Salafi lifestyle is based on personal piety and ritual discipline which, for his parents, were the hallmarks of a ‘respectable boy’. His parents were thus not concerned with the theological underpinnings of his new beliefs. All they cared about, according to Zulfiqar, was that he was ostensibly praying and fasting, and not chasing girls.

Zulfiqar converted to Salafism while he was at university but said he was aware of the ‘brothers’ (read: congregation) in Luton while he was growing up. At the time, he just thought Salafis were like any other Muslims but just more committed to religion. It was only when he engaged in deeper conversations with practitioners that his opinions and lifestyle began to change. Prior to going to university, in his words, he lived an ‘ignorant’ (jahil) life. This term forms a regular feature of Salafi discourse, made in allusion to the ‘Age of Ignorance’ (jahiliyya) of pagan pre-Islamic Arabia, which directly preceded the era of the Prophet Mohammed that was marked by the revelation of the Qur’an. Despite smoking cannabis on rare occasions with his friends, and talking to girls at school and college, Abbas claims he did not do much wrong, as he always tried to pray and fasted without fail during Ramadan. It was only when he gained knowledge (‘ilm) of Islam that he was compelled to change his outlook and practices:

When I first started university, I only knew what the local imam and what my parents had taught me, [but] I was very interested in religion. I was questioning a lot of things as I was growing up. A lot of the things the community did didn’t make any sense to me – the pirs
[saints] and the magic and all that – I just didn’t believe in all that. It just seemed really backward and stupid […] Some of my friends [at university] were meeting up with these brothers from the [student union] Islamic Society who would take them to Islamic talks. They asked me to go, but I always refused until one Ramadan when, for some reason, I decided to go. It was a talk on Islam and economics, and I remember being really confused at the title as those two things don’t mix, at least I thought they didn’t […] Looking back now, that decision completely changed my life.

Going to university was a life-changing experience for Zulfiqar. He became involved with Salafi missionary activity on campus (da’wa), and started living a more puritanical life, giving up all his previous excesses. He made lasting relationships with devout Salafis from all over the country, particularly Birmingham, where the sect has its largest presence in terms of numbers and activity. Zulfiqar often made regular visits to Birmingham to attend lectures and seminars, and catch up with friends. After graduating, he returned to Luton and continued living with his parents. Once back, he decided that he would also engage in the ‘da’wa’ on the local scene, transferring the missionary work he had embarked upon on campus to his home town. This was highly important to Zulfiqar because, as mentioned previously, the act of da’wa is a religious obligation for Salafis. As per their belief in mimesis, this importance stems from the traditions that hold the Prophet Mohammed spent his lifetime proselytising. Luton was also fertile ground for this kind of Salafi da’wa activity. The town boasts a large Muslim population, many of whom are British-born, English-speaking and seeking alternatives to the impenetrable perspectives on Islam offered by more mainstream institutions. Zulfiqar thus teamed up with the other members of the Salafi mission (some of whom he knew through community networks prior to his conversion), and set about his work. Despite his obvious zeal, clear intentions and experience on the national da’wa circuit, Zulfiqar was not very good at it. He found it difficult to bond with youths that frequented the offices, who couldn’t relate to his ‘geeky’ mannerisms and overly complicated and dry theological arguments. By his own admission he was also quite lazy. He found it challenging to motivate himself for preaching, often comparing himself with the likes of Khidr and Ammar, and concluding that he was just simply not on their level. For the most part, however, Zulfiqar was happiest going to the mosque, learning about his religion, and playing video games in his spare time. It was apparent that he enjoyed the ‘black-and-white’ coherence and certainty that the Salafi doctrine brought to
his life – trying to emulate the spiritual example of the Prophet in all that he did even though, at times, this caused him strife and self-doubt. Following the Prophetic tradition was the ‘safest’ option, because only the Prophet knew the true meaning of the Qur’an and, by implication, Islam itself. Importantly, he was a member of a quietist branch of the Salafi sect who maintained a conscious distance from political affairs and thought Luton, in his own words, was ‘the best place on Earth’.

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Although my friends at the MSP were very active and well known in the town, and generally enjoyed a good reputation for their piety, manners, youth and rehabilitation work, they were not the only Islamic revivalist group operating in Luton. Also significant was the presence of Tablighi Jammat (TJ) another transnational revivalist organisation. TJ, like the Salafi sect, also maintain a quietist stance and distances itself from politics. In terms of religious or missionary activity, TJ is again similar in its theological and methodological approach to the Salafis. There is a strong emphasis on personal piety and daily ritual observance, and an obligation to carry our da’wa wherever its members are, regardless of their social or economic circumstances. Moreover, TJ Muslims that I spoke with believed that Muslims in general had lost their way in the modern world. This was as a result of the cultural effects of Westernisation and colonial domination, which led to Muslims abandoning the true essence of their faith. This, they argued, resulted in the wrath of God that was undeniably demonstrable by the relatively lowly plight of the contemporary global Muslim community (ummah). By way of an antidote, TJ Muslims advocate a ‘back to basics’ doctrine, where ‘non-practising’ and ‘lapsed’ Muslims were gently encouraged to attend the mosque, seek penance and regularly perform religious rituals and obligations. By reverting to a basic code of personal ethics and discipline, thereby creating a more pious entitled community in the eyes of God, Muslims could build a foundation for eventual revival and a return to past glories.

Ostensibly, there is seemingly not much difference between TJ and Salafi Muslims. Both emphasise and value personal piety, ritual adherence and a yearning for the ‘purity’ of the past. Similarly, many TJ Muslims that I came across were invited to the movement by committed preachers (da’is), and many of the ‘converts’ were hitherto lapsed in their faith or had been disillusioned by traditional alternatives. However, there were distinct and insurmountable differences between the two sects in the realm of creed (aqidah) and theological methodology (manhaj).
Much of this discussion is beyond the scope of this book but, for our purposes here, it is worth noting that Salafis claim that their creed is the only one that is totally devoid of human innovation (bid’a’) and polytheistic practices (shirk). They argue that the classical scholars of Islam inserted their personal reasoning and biases into sacred rulings. This was unacceptable according to the Salafis, since Islamic scriptures were divine and could not be tampered with by human agents. Consequently, Salafis interpret the scriptures literally, rather than the analogous and hermeneutic approach taken by every other Sunni and Shia legal and theological school throughout the ages. Since TJ Muslims, by and large, follow mainstream Sunni schools of law (mostly Hanafi), Salafis reject them as ‘deviant’. Salafis also argue that scholars rulings on issues where there is no direct evidence from divine sources is akin to polytheism, both on the part of the misguided scholar and also on the part of the uncritical devotee, who has rendered trust in matters of religion to a fallible human agent. The logical charge for Salafis, therefore, is that such individuals were following themselves and/or other humans, fraught with imperfections, rather than the infallible example of the Prophet Mohammed. This, they argue, is associating partners with God and wholly against the Prophetic message of monotheism (tawhid). Differences aside, my friends at the MSP and TJ were both politically quietist. However, as we shall see, not all Salafi groups in Luton were politically disengaged and neither were all political movements there secular.

Luton was also a centre of activity for two of the most notorious ‘Islamist’ movements that were openly recruiting in the town at the time. One of these organisations, formerly known as Al-Muhajiroun (AM), has since been banned in the UK after an amendment to the Terrorism Act in 2010. The other, Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT), holds a similar political vision but its activities remain legal in the UK, for the time being at least. Both AM and HT call for the re-establishment of the Caliphate (Khilafah) – an imagined Pan-Islamic nation-state where sharia law forms the basis of the constitution and public life. Activists from both groups argue that only God’s law should be applied on Earth, as man-made laws are prone to error and, of course, following them is akin to polytheism (shirk) because rule (hukma) is the exclusive domain of God. The leader of AM, Omar Bakri Mohammed (OBM), was once the leader of HT in the UK. AM was created in the mid-1990s after a disagreement on HT’s methodology (manhaj) among its then leadership. OBM took a literalist view and argued that the establishment of the Caliphate was a religious obligation anywhere in the world, including Britain. HT’s position on the other hand had always been to establish the state in a Muslim-majority country for
practical and strategic reasons. Both organisations cited evidence from the Qur’an and Hadith literature to justify their political mission and claimed that working for the re-establishment of the Islamic state is the foremost religious obligation (fard) for all Muslims living anywhere in the world. The absolute necessity for living under an Islamic state was further predicated on the argument that living a righteous and pious Muslim life was only possible within such a polity. Both argued that it was incumbent on all Muslims to work for this goal above all others and that, through this, they would bring an end to the humiliation of Muslims around the world that began with the advent of colonial domination of Islamic lands and its people. This particular expression of anti-colonialism, from my observations, maintained great traction with many of my informants but, curiously, it compelled very few of them to join either organisation. In fact, both HT and AM were widely ridiculed by the majority of my informants who knew of them and what they stood for. Many dismissed their agenda as idealistic and impractical, while others questioned the theological legitimacy of such a position. Consequently, both these groups wielded a very marginal influence among the youth or the Muslim community as a whole.

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People say America is the Great Satan. They’re wrong. Britain is the Greatest Satan. Look what they’ve done to the world. The Americans are amateurs compared to the British […] They [the British] went around the world and took whatever they wanted. Thieves and murderers. Muslims should take back what is theirs […] Look at what they’re doing to Muslims today – [Muslim] sisters being attacked in the street because they wear the hijab [headscarf], [Muslim] brothers can’t get a job unless they shave their beards […] You’re Muslim aren’t you? Do you think they [non-Muslims] like you here, bruv? […] The kuffar [non-believers] are at war with Muslims because they want our wealth and stop the spread of Islam […] Allah says in the Qur’an: ‘They may plot and plan, but I am the best of plotters and the best of planners’.

– Hamed, 25

There were very few members of HT and AM who were active in Luton at the time of my research. Of those members who were, a significant portion came in from other parts of England to preach. Bury Park’s high
concentration of Muslims made it a fertile ground for recruitment, at least in theory. HT activity in the town at the time was, by and large, mostly out of sight. They chose to recruit members through social networks and staged events. While AM also employed a similar strategy they ran, in addition, a ‘da’wa’ stall on Dunstable Road in Bury Park. Almost every day, from late morning to early afternoon, a group of bearded, predominantly South Asian men, dressed in robes, combat gear or a combination of both, stood around this stall looking to strike up a conversation with passers-by. They would disperse into smaller groups of twos or threes at busy periods. Sometimes, if the debate was particularly contentious, the various clusters would unify with all focusing on the battle between one set of opposing individuals. Such debates have been known to get rather heated on occasion. Most of the time, however, people passed by without noticing them. On the stall itself, one could find a rich assortment of fundamentalist literature. Some incited violence, others were anti-semitic, and a few sought to provide critiques of capitalism. At the same time, one could also find leaflets and pamphlets promoting ritual piety, the importance of monotheism and Qur’anic exegesis. By far the most salient topic, however, was the Caliphate. More specifically, on how it was a fundamental duty of all Muslims to re-establish the Caliphate wherever they find themselves in the world (as contrary to the HT methodology of establishing the Caliphate in the Islamic world for practical reasons).

Activists at the stall spent most of their time talking among themselves. It appeared that they shared a close bond with each other. Some of them were close friends and were constantly eager to remind me that they loved each other (as brothers), ‘for the sake of Allah’. Others were less interested in the social aspect of the work but committed solely to the ‘da’wa’. In my first encounter with members of AM, they were not aware that I was a researcher. I approached the stall out of curiosity and began to scan through the literature, while the others were either talking to passers-by or to each other. After a while, I was approached by an individual who introduced himself as Hamed. He asked me if I was interested in ‘the Truth’. We chatted for a while about the need for the Caliphate, the West’s war on Islam and the urgent need to join a political party. Anticipating a longer sermon, I disclosed to him that I was actually a PhD student, studying Muslims in Luton, and would very much like to talk to him about his beliefs. I suggested that we meet for lunch after his duties were completed, and he agreed.

We arranged to meet at a fried chicken shop a few metres away. On arrival, I was immediately greeted by over a dozen other AM activists, some of whom were present at the stall earlier. After some pleasant
exchanges with the activists, I was ushered to a table with a few other activists, and immediately offered food. Hamed was of Bangladeshi origin and had lived in Bury Park all his life. He studied Computer Science at a university in London and, upon returning to his home town, starting questioning the role and relevance of Islam in his life. After a period of investigation – attending lectures at the mosque, reading Islamic books and contacting prominent local religious personalities – he decided to join AM. I asked him what ultimately swayed his mind:

The Muslim ummah is divided. Our Muslim brothers and sisters are being oppressed every day. As a Muslim, it’s my duty to defend the honour of the ummah [...] We have a glorious history; we conquered so much of the world and led the world in so many fields, we were able to achieve all of this because of Islam [...] We have lost that power now, and every Muslim should work in the path of Allah to get that back. I work with these brothers to re-establish the Islamic state because Allah orders me to do so.

Although this response seemed somewhat rehearsed, it struck me how similar the recruitment methods and rhetoric employed by Hamed and his comrades were to those employed by HT. As mentioned earlier, the key difference between the two groups was on methodology (manhaj) and creed (aqidah). HT took a ‘rational’ approach to all of their activities, even in creedal matters. AM, on the other hand, argued that human rationale is flawed and akin to grave innovation (bid’a). When fulfilling one’s religious obligations, they argued, one should adhere strictly to the text without besmirching its purity with human inference. In this regard, AM members self-identified as Salafis or, more precisely, Salafi-jihadis. This attribution was, however, fervently contested by my informants at the MSP – who themselves were members of the quietist and most popular branch of global Salafism. My colleagues at the MSP argued that AM members were ‘misguided’ and ‘lacked knowledge about the din [religion]’. They took it upon themselves to engage in debates with the AM in order to bring them back into the fold of ‘orthodoxy’. Consequently, delegations from the Salafi mission were frequently sent to the stall for the purpose of debate. Without fail, however, these ‘debates’ digressed into highly charged inter-sectarian public slanging matches, with either side refusing to yield. Despite the evident lack of progress, the debates continued. I always wondered to what extent the two groups were actually trying to persuade each other, rather than merely parading their self-perceived superior knowledge and consequent piety for the public gaze.
Back at the chicken shop, we moved on to discussing the difference between HT and AM. I suggested to Hamed that, to me, his mission seemed identical to that proposed by HT. The only difference being that AM members were quite content to establish the Caliphate in the UK, for example, whereas HT members were not. Hamed replied with a theological justification discussed above but also cited the credentials of his leader, OBM. He argued that OBM was once the leader of HT in the UK and that it was always his intention to establish the Caliphate in the UK. Moreover, Hamed added that this was the reason why HT’s global leadership (based in Jordan) decided to expel him from the role. In the 1980s and 1990s, OBM was responsible for the recruitment of hundreds of young British Muslims to HT. By 1996, his charismatic hold on the group in the UK began to cause consternation within the global leadership of the party. They feared that a cult of personality, centred around OBM, was replacing loyalty to the organisation. In addition, OBM’s rogue, Salafist-inspired methodology to re-establish the Caliphate went directly against the leadership’s strategy of focusing efforts in the Muslim-majority Middle East – an area they referred to as the ‘majaal’ (domain). For HT, its role in the UK was simply to garner support for the ideology of the party and to recruit high-profile members of the international Muslim elite that frequented its shores. The idea was to send these individuals back to their countries of origin (in the majaal) where their prominence, social capital and further recruitment activities could contribute to the eventual goal of staging an ‘Islamic revolution’ through a military coup.

Initially, AM was a non-violent organisation, imitating HT’s approach of calling Muslims into action (da’wa) and encouraging radical political engagement. However, after 9/11, the organisation underwent a methodological reformation. In the aftermath of 9/11, OBM declared himself a Salafi and defended the attacks as a necessary military technique in the obligatory jihad against the West. This position only intensified leading up to the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005. Following the bombings, OBM left the UK for Lebanon. While there, the Home Office identified him as a key agent in the radicalisation of British Muslims (such as the 7/7 bombers), and informed him that he could no longer return to the UK. At the time of research, OBM had been absent from the da’wa circuit in the UK for three or four years, but his influence remained as potent as ever. ‘He is our sheikh. Our leader and our teacher’, insisted Hamed. ‘He instructs us in Islam using the Qur’an and Sunnah as the only source, and his knowledge of the din [religion]’. It was obvious that Hamed was
impressed by his ‘sheikh’. He frequently referred to OBM’s wide training (in Saudi Arabia), moral character and wisdom on all matters.

At the time of writing, OBM is serving a six-year sentence in a Lebanese prison for terrorism charges and links to Syria’s Al-Qaeda-inspired Nusra Front. Since his exile from the UK, AM has taken on many guises under the leadership of Anjem Choudary – a British-born Muslim of Pakistani heritage and loyal lieutenant to OBM. At the time of research, AM operated legally in the UK. In 2010, however, the organisation was proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000. Despite this, the organisation has continued to operate under various aliases, promoting violence against non-believers (kuffar), and encouraging Muslims to engage in jihad against the forces of the West. In 2016, Choudary was also imprisoned for supporting and inviting others to support and/or join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS), after the latter declared itself to be a bona fide Caliphate in 2014. Since then, a number of British Muslims who were members or affiliated with AM have travelled to Iraq and Syria to join ISIS. I never saw Hamed again after our meeting, and I often wonder what may have happened to him, fearing the worst. His austere views and chilling anger towards ‘the West’ left me quite shaken. I found that I simply couldn’t reason with him. Although his interpretations, and those of his friends, were very marginal in Luton, the potent sense of conviction, coupled with a highly politicised explanation for the lowly status of Muslims in the contemporary world, clearly chimed with some, both here and abroad.

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HT and AM are marginal voices within the Muslim community, not just in Luton but among British Muslims in general. Although their ideas are radical, they are predicated on the fundamental belief that the holy scriptures of Islam (the Qur’an and Prophetic Traditions/Hadith) are the only source of authority for Muslims. This implies the rejection of any non-Islamic cultural influences within the sphere of belief and conduct. Although AM and HT adopted an extreme interpretation of this doctrine, all Islamic revivalist and reformist movements (including TJ and quietist Salafis) seemingly share the same concern vis-à-vis the need to ‘purify’ the religion, and restore it to its previous glories. These ideas profoundly resonated with almost all of my British-born informants in Luton. The abstraction of Islam into a de-culturised, ethical and political identity was highly appealing to young Muslims seeking alternatives to the ethno-religious identities held by their parents. In addition, it also appears that,
for a disturbing proportion of my young informants, wider perceptions of Muslims in the era of the ‘war on terror’, and the constant barrage of negative press relating to Muslims, had consolidated a sense of ‘Otherness’ in relation to wider British society. My informants constantly claimed to be ‘Muslim’ above and beyond all other identity markers, and emphasised a will to demonstrate to non-Muslim others that Islam was not a religion of terror or violence. Many argued that Islam was a peaceful ‘way of life’ that could be applied anywhere in the world – whether one was in the minority or majority – and that this was Islam’s ‘beauty’. Moreover, and quite paradoxically, this ‘beauty’ required the stripping of idiosyncratic cultural syncretisms borrowed from South Asia in order to be realised.

The appeal of revivalist Islam, therefore, is two-fold: firstly, in the sphere of ritual piety and ethical practice; and secondly, through conceptions of group solidarity that transcend the nation-state. Young Muslims welcomed the existential security of a ‘back to basics’ doctrine of certainty, because they were necessarily disenchanted after centuries of epistemological deviances. They warmed to the powerful idea that Muslims should do ‘as the Prophet did’, and reject all of the innovations that came after him. Furthermore, the egalitarianism and inclusivity implicit within the concept of ‘ummah’ played a crucial role in identity formations. For many, concern for the plight of the international community of believers was not only a religious obligation but a political reality. The ‘war on terror’ and its consequent geo-political effects were palpable in the conversations that I had with so many of my informants. Events in Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Kashmir and so on, were important because co-religionists in these places were perceived to be battling against the forces of oppression, poverty and violence. My informants identified deeply with these strangers in distant, unfamiliar lands, and wanted something to be done about it. Some of them, like Hamed, wanted to fight neo-imperialism through establishing a bellicose Islamic state, others wanted to raise funds for charitable causes in the Muslim world, while others still concluded that prayers (salawat) and constant mindfulness (fikr) were the best options during such dark political times.

As I have argued in this book, such events and developments have seemingly given rise to novel forms of religious identity intrinsic to Luton or, by extension perhaps, to Britain. In accordance with Talal Asad’s famous intervention, we may be witnessing the rise of a localised ‘discursive tradition’ (1986), where British Muslims are striving for a sense of text-based orthodoxy that suits their particular temporal and genealogical positionalities as a post-colonial diaspora. However, as Samuli Schielke (2009) rightly notes, not all Muslims are pious all of the time and, equally,
not all transgressors are morally apathetic. Rather, Muslims everywhere are in a constant process of negotiating conflicting and incoherent ‘moral registers’ in the practice of everyday life, none more so than those living in societies where Islamic values are marginal or ‘Other’, as is the case with Britain. Although ‘the text’ was undoubtedly important for all of my informants, many of them (in fact the vast majority) did not consciously adhere to religious rulings in everything that they did. One such informant, Joynul, was a seventeen-year-old young man of Bangladeshi origin, whom I met at a Bangladeshi-majority youth centre in the heart of Bury Park. In his own words, Joynul didn’t ‘practice’ Islam but held aspirations to do so in the future. Although he frequently visited Bangladesh with his family, and shared a close relationship with many relatives there, he did not identify as a Bangladeshi in the same way as his parents did. Curiously, he was also uninterested in claiming to be English either, arguing that he couldn’t be fully English as he was not White, but a Muslim. Rather, he was most comfortable to be referred to as a ‘British Muslim’.

Do I think I’m British? Yeah, I’ve got a British passport, so I’m British, but I’m not English. I’m a Muslim […] I don’t pray five times a day or anything, […] I’d like to when I get older, but I’m still Muslim, and I’m proud of that, even if people look down on us in England.

Clearly, Joynul’s ethnic identity did not matter too much to him, as he did not fully identify as either a Bengali or an Englishman. Instead, he prioritised his religious identity without being, as he claimed, ‘a religious person’. Thus, Joynul’s Muslim identity was not just about being religious, but it succeeded in creating a cognitive space where his ethnic, religious, sociological and political differences with wider society could be reconciled. Joynul did not feel at home with his peers in Bangladesh. At the same time, while he conceded that he may be ‘more Westernised’, he nonetheless refused to be labelled ‘English’. In this regard, as we have seen, his views correlated with the majority of my British-born informants. I asked Joynul whether he thought his Bangladeshi cultural roots complicated a strictly Muslim identity based solely on adherence to the Qur’an and Prophetic Tradition:

Not really. Every one there [Bangladesh] is Muslim, and all the Bengalis in Luton are Muslim as well. But I don’t think I’m Bangladeshi, just like I’m not English. Bangladeshi of my age are different to the ones in Bangladesh, we’re more westernised […] But you can live here and still be Muslim, can’t you? You can be Muslim anywhere. It doesn’t matter where you’re from. That’s why
America is trying to fight Muslims everywhere. They [America] know how big the ummah is.

His final remark was also telling. Joynul argued that Islam can be observed anywhere and this for him was the reason why America had declared the ‘war on terror’. Even though the universal time-space applicability of Islam was a common trope, to jump from religious observance to geo-political commentary was curious. Nevertheless, this was certainly not unusual among Joynul’s peers in Luton. Young Muslims often conflated a sense of being Muslim with affinity to the political affairs of fellow Muslims around the world. The more pious ones, such as Zulfiqar, justified this ‘concern’ (fikr) for fellow Muslims by citing scripture, such as the following hadith: ‘The ummah is like a body; if one part of it is wounded, the whole body responds with sleeplessness and fever’. In contrast to Zulfiqar, however, Joynul was not a member of any revivalist or reformist group. Nonetheless, he still advocated the need for solidarity with fellow Muslims, wherever they were. Moreover, even though he was not a ‘practising’ Muslim, he not only self-identified as a Muslim but claimed it was his primary identity – above and beyond ethno-linguistic or nationalist allegiances of his parent’s generation. In this regard, his views were consistent with the vast majority of my British-born informants who were mostly comfortable with identifying as British, but were quick to point out that their Muslim identity was just as important to them, if not more so.

Notes

6. Sufism is the mystical dimension of Islam that prioritises personal ‘union’ (wahda) with God through ritual meditation (dhikr) and, often, obedience to a spiritual master (shaykh), although not always. Sufis believe in the ‘unseen’ (al-ghayb) and intercession of both living and dead saints (awliya). These ideas and practices are regarded as heretical (bid’a) by revivalist and reformist sects.