



# **British Muslims:** New Directions in Islamic Thought, Creativity and Activism

***By Philip Lewis & Sadek Hamid***

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his timely contribution, co-authored by Philip Lewis and Sadek, documents the ever-evolving and contemporary nature of British Muslimness. Both authors are recognised experts in the field of and

have written extensively in British Muslim studies, but it is the differing backgrounds of the contributors that largely enriches this book. Philip Lewis, situated primarily in interfaith work and lecturing in peace studies in Bradford in the north of England and Sadek Hamid, activist-academic specialising in the study of British Muslims and based at the University of Oxford each bring their unique insights to the project, despite the at times disjointed nature of their discussion.

The book begins with a discussion of the Bradford-based Muslim Women's Council's plans to develop the UK's first female-led mosque. Highlighting this remarkable and noteworthy project sheds light on some significant factors in the UK; firstly the way in which Muslim women are often excluded from Muslim houses of worship in Britain and secondly how Muslim women, despite the flawed perceptions of them as oppressed, which persist in the UK and in Europe more generally, coupled with gendered struggles and battles within the British Muslim community, find and create spaces for their own agency and self-determination.

The book is split into five major and distinct themes; firstly it provides an historic map of Muslim demography and Islamic seminaries in Britain. The book continues to discuss Muslim political engagement in the country, followed by a discussion of extremism and concludes with an analysis of Muslim creativity in the UK.

The way in which the authors chart the history of Muslimness in the UK illustrates the ethnic demographic constitution of British Muslims (who are diverse but are predominantly from the former British colonies in the Asian subcontinent), the geographical concentrations of Muslims in the UK (through the categorisation of hyper-diverse and bi-cultural British towns), but also the diverse religious traditions that exist within the framework of British Muslimness. This historical mapping is important given that it provides a meaningful and detailed timeline of Muslim traditions and

the evolution of Muslimness in the UK – this mapping details nuances, intra-contextual specificities and also refutes myths of Muslim homogeneity, something which often underlies dominant Islamophobic tropes across Europe.<sup>1</sup>

In its historical mapping of Muslimness in Britain, the authors also review and analyse the British Islamic seminary tradition in chapter two of the book. Here, there is a presentation of how this has evolved and impacted the Islamic education of Muslims in the UK. Again, this showcases the diversity of the community in the UK and whilst some Muslims have stayed more rooted in traditional seminary and theological positions, others have shifted towards more nuanced and contextually influenced seminary traditions. This, whilst perhaps reflective of the current state of affairs in terms of British Muslimness, risks constructing a dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims, thus pitting the so-called moderate Muslim in the position of the 'good' Muslim whilst the more traditional or comparatively more conservative Muslim is cast as 'bad'. Furthermore, these binary constructions play into the hands of Islamophobes and create division within the Muslim community.

The exploration of Muslim political engagement and Muslim creativity was by far the most interesting and compelling section of the book. The review of Muslim political engagement was well laid out and considers key issues regarding British Muslim engagement such as the particularisms of South Asian *Biraderi* practices and how these influence the nature of Muslim political representation, to comparatively more mainstream participation pursued by the younger generations such as by the key Muslim political actors from Tory party co-chair and now lifetime peer, Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, or that of former Respect Party leader and, most recently, Labour Party West Midlands mayoral candidate, Salma Yaqoob. Notwithstanding, whilst the book does provide a background mapping of Muslim engagement with British democracy – an introduction if you will – it uses a somewhat light touch and does not rigorously explore the complexities of Muslim political engagement in the country that may be useful in considering the intersectional nature of their political engagement and in particular, the barriers that this often presents.

<sup>4</sup> See Law, I., Easat-Daas, A., Merali, A. and Sayyid, S., (2019) *Countering Islamophobia in Europe*. Abingdon: Palgrave Macmillan.

The final substantive chapter of the book deals with Muslim creativity, representing a novel contribution to the literature. The nature of 'Muslim cool' and Muslim cultural studies within the framework of second and subsequent generations of British Muslims is a new and emerging area of inquiry. In the co-edited book *Countering Islamophobia in Europe*, following an extensive pan-European two-year research project my colleagues and I determined that Muslim *verism*, along with other key strategies, represents a mode for combatting Islamophobia. The basic premise being that Muslim creative expression and self-representation constitutes a means of combatting the basis of established Islamophobic myths, such as the view that Muslims are a monolith or that Muslim values and practices are at odds with Western norms and society. The work that Lewis and Hamid detail in their book, such as through their British Muslim music, art and activism or writing, showcases this type of *verism* to which we were speaking. Nonetheless, in analysing the case of 'Happy British Muslims!' Muslim-led cover of the Pharrell Williams song 'Happy' and the controversy that this brought about, including condemnation and criticism that the song and performance represented a desire to pander to the 'good Muslim' construction and also critique that music was *haram*, and in particular the song in question was both misogynistic and hyper-sexualised and as a result, a *halal* version with women edited out was produced – bringing us full circle back to the introductory chapter of the book and the exclusion (by some) of Muslim women in British Muslim society.

In sum, the book represents an insightful and much-needed contribution to the study of British Muslimness, particularly in the current period were misinformed dominant narratives surrounding Muslims and Islam in Britain that are widespread.