THE TIMES

Mosques: Sources of spiritual comfort, or so out of touch?

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Published at 12:00AM, July 26 2004

EVER since the era-defining events of September 11, 2001, Britain's two million Muslims have been the subject of a series of cruel and damaging portrayals. Today, that changes. In a unique four-part series of daily reports, *The Times* sets out to expose the myths and stereotypes that abound about Muslim Britain. Forget rabble-rousing preachers and Islamic militants. Here is the truth — spoken by the genuine British Muslim voices you never hear elsewhere.

For his four dispatches, our correspondent travelled the length and breadth of the country over six weeks this summer. The result is a never-seen-before snapshot of life in Britain's Muslim communities — from the countryside to the inner city, for the first time, Britain's Muslim diaspora is bought vividly to life.

He begins with the debate ringing loudly throughout Britain's 1,200 mosques — how best to balance traditional Islamic ideals with the increasingly Western practices of British-born Muslims.

AT THE height of the furore in 1989 that followed the publication of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, when I was 17 years old, I remember the visit to Glasgow of Ahmed Deedat, the Indian-born scholar and founder member of the Islamic Propagation Centre International. Arriving only a few weeks after the late Ayatollah Khomeini's audacious fatwa on the writer, Deedat seemed only too keen to intensify prejudices and predict catastrophic consequences. His arguments were often inane. "Salman Rushdie was born to die," he said. "When you break his surname into its two syllables: that much is apparent. It was written that he would die. Rush-Die: he is rushing to die."

At a particularly sensitive juncture for Britain's Muslim community, Deedat was unable to articulate that community's feelings beyond the clenched emotions of insularity and rage. His visit also confirmed the apathy of mainstream mosques. Muslim leaders tend to involve themselves in wider debates only when struck by the ferocity of an international crisis such as the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, 9/11 or, now, Iraq.

FIFTEEN years later, has anything altered that detachment from the realities of life in Britain? I am in Derby, it is raining and for around half an hour from 1pm small groups of men pour through the front door of a converted house near the centre of town. This is a far cry from the palatial surroundings of, say, Regent's Park mosque — the front garden is an overgrown mess and strewn with litter from takeaways. The dark Persian carpet smells dank, and condensation streaks the windows. By 1.30, around 80 men are sitting barefoot over two levels of the Victorian semi. Downstairs, what used to be a kitchen has been converted into a prayer room. Late arrivals — polite enough not to disturb any of the worshippers — take their place in the hallway. Many of the men are friends, and exchange news of their world as the Friday prayer ends, and the imam prepares for his *khutbah* (Friday sermon). The imam, a Saudi priest in his late forties, most likely a Wahhabi, speaks English hesitantly and with the aid of a primitive speaker system. Over the next half hour, he rarely strays from the subject of the War on Terror. "The West is full of bad intentions," he says, reaching an angry climax.

Around him, the men look at each other with bored and sullen expressions: this is Islam at its most uninspiring. "The photographs from Abu Ghraib are proof of bad intentions," he continues. "George Bush and Tony Blair have declared a war on Islam. This is a new Crusade."

After the prayer, the men gather their shoes in near silence from the hallway, bid each other farewell and return to work. I stand chatting to Jehangir Karim, 34, a British-born Muslim working as a part-time decorator. "What use is this Saudi imam?" he asks. "All he wants to talk about is Bush and Blair. This is of no use to me. He does not understand my life and what I need. The *khutbah* is supposed to give social and spiritual advice; instead, he is ranting every week."

Ever since al-Qaeda's attacks on September 11, Britain's 1,200 mosques and, more particularly, the 2,000 imams who preach in them, have faced widespread suspicion. Richard Reid — the 29-year-old white convert now serving a life sentence in a US prison for his December 2001 attempt to blow up an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami — attended the notorious Finsbury Park mosque in North London. More recently, in March, eight young British Muslims from southeast England were arrested on suspicion of a bomb plot. Five have now been charged.

Yet despite the existence of a few rogue imams, Britain's mosques face more immediate hurdles. In the past six weeks, as clarified to me by leaders of Muslim organisations, Muslim parliamentarians, parents and imams, Muslims in Britain need an educated Islamic clergy that speaks English and is erudite in the customs and conventions of the British Isles.

In Britain the supply chain of imams is restricted by the lack of institutions for training them. Fewer than 10 per cent of British imams have received their instruction in the UK. At least one imam is attached to each mosque, and often there are two or three. Most come from abroad. Of the few that are European citizens, several are dictatorial part-timers who have been recruited from their immigrant communities by ad hoc and undemocratic councils. Others are, to put it simply, religious entrepreneurs who net an income from mosque donations.

"They are men educated in a different environment, and many have never lived in a truly multicultural society before," says Maulana Shahid Raza, of the Muslim College in West London, one of two British institutes equipped with a contemporary syllabus for instructing imams. "I feel sorry for some of them when they come here. I really do. But they are like people crossing a busy road for the first time. No one has taught them the Highway Code."

Recently, in a bid to grasp the developing rift between traditionalist imams and their critics, I attended *Educating the Ummah: The role of Imams and Mosques in Britain*, a Friday night seminar at the H. G. Wells centre in Woking aimed at provoking an institutional change within the religious orthodoxy.

As drunken locals spilled out of pubs near Church Street East, an altogether more solemn Friday night crowd of around 250, including women and teenagers, gathered noisily inside a large auditorium. After prayers, and a dinner which, among other dishes, consisted of sag paneer and rice, augmented by gajrela, the sweet carrot dessert favoured by the Asian Muslim community, several speakers rose to highlight the gulf between successive generations of Muslims.

"We must take ourselves to task for failing to deal with this problem in the past," said Dr Syed Aziz Pasha, the director of the Union of Muslim Organisations. "Our mosques are not democratic enough. The committees that run them are not democratic enough. Then we wonder why a younger generation is turning away from us?"

His argument was keenly embraced by all attending. Yet Lord Ahmed, the Labour peer with a reputation for bluntness, illustrated the harshest example of religious concern. "Going into my local mosque these days is a worrying experience," he said. "I don't feel safe and welcome there. I feel as if someone is going to stab me. I just want to pray and leave as quickly as I can. Where is the sense of community I experienced as a child when the mosque offered news, debate and social advice? Why has it disappeared?" Minutes later, he added: "The system needs to be reformed by us. That is our responsibility alone."

A week later I went to meet Lord Ahmed at the House of Lords. Sitting in an upstairs members' tearoom, he ordered me a cup of coffee. "And I'll have tea," he told the attendant. "Pakistani tea, please." He laughed, a throaty bellow. "They always offer me Indian tea. I get my own back by asking for Pakistani tea.

"There is a crisis in the mosques that has been ignored for too long," he said. Lord Ahmed has, in recent months, been encouraged by the news that forthcoming citizenship tests this September will require foreign imams to display a conversational grasp of English: they further impose a demonstration of near-fluent reading and writing skills within two years. "Too many imams have no power of English," he added. "Too many have no understanding of the complexities of living in this country. They don't know the procedures of modern life."

FRUSTRATED with the inability, and in some cases the outright refusal, of imams to concede the challenges of modern Britain, an informal lecture circuit has prospered in recent years. Internet groups, Islamic forums and organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain and the East London mosque in Whitechapel promote discussions and symposiums on topics ranging from the merits of arranged marriages to social exclusion and the role of democracy in Islam.

"In many ways a new awareness of Islam in Britain — by Muslims and non-Muslims alike — has been heightened since September 11," says Humayun Ansari, the author of *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain Since 1800,* and the director of the Centre for Ethnic Minority Studies and Equal Opportunities. "This awareness of Islam has good and bad facets," he adds. "On the one hand, it has featured Islam under a spotlight. But it has also forced Muslims to search out the truth. The fact stands that 99.9 per cent of Muslims in the UK are law-abiding citizens who have little to do with Islamic supremacy. This religious intolerance is new to them."

An intellectual Islamic revival, almost unseen by many mosques, is apparent in many parts of Britain. While travelling around the country in the past six weeks, I have attended more than a dozen seminars and debates. In Bradford one Thursday night, one day before Donald Rumsfeld's irascible testimony before a senate committee on his role in the Abu Ghraib scandal, I went to the University of Bradford for one such discussion, *What is the role of Democracy in Islam?*, presided over by Dr Abdelwahab El-Affendi, of the University of Westminster, a senior research fellow on the project on Democracy in the Muslim World at the Centre of Democracy. Searching for the Richmond Building on University Avenue, I asked a young white female student for directions. "Are you here for the lecture on Islam?" she grinned. "I'll show you where it is; I'm headed there myself."

For a Thursday night, the student social high point of the week, the lecture theatre was crowded beyond my expectations. I counted more than 100 people take their places before El-Affendi began reading from his script. While his speech, to a great degree, served only to obfuscate further his motion, questions directed from the floor pointed towards a thoughtful atmosphere among those attending.

Many took the form of heated diatribes. "Why must we accept that Islam should be democratic?" argued one young Muslim. "The Koran tsays that we should follow the words and teachings of Allah, as delivered to us by Prophet Muhammad. That is not democratic. There should be no debate on the subject." He shook his head furiously as El-Affendi tried to provide verification of Ottoman-era Islamic courts that governed by democratic tenets. At the back of the room, a group of Muslim teenagers, dressed in Versace and Calvin Klein, giggled.

His next questioner was equally irate. "What is the point of American-style democracy? Bush was not even elected to the White House. We have witnessed what is happening in Iraqi prisons, we have seen American occupiers torturing Muslim brothers. How can they describe themselves as democratic? It is a hypocritical notion."

On a recent Sunday afternoon in North London I visited another gathering in Finsbury Park. Abdul Karim Hattin, a young scholar who converted to Islam in 1991, delivered *The Importance of Malcolm X*. The discussion, much like the fiery figure it

sought to dissect, was energetic and entertaining, if a bit unruly. Hattin examined Malcolm X's early years, before his conversion to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam in 1949, evaluating his lawless upbringing against his subsequent devotion to Islam. Afterwards, as the 100-strong audience dissolved out into the stifling, rain-soaked streets of Stoke Newington, a small group of young men, the curious and the devout, made for a coffee shop. Over hot Turkish teas and chocolate croissants, the six men sought to clarify Hattin's thesis. The discussion was often lucid and rigorous, but the asinine and inane seemed to hover close by on occasion:

Omar Hadsa: "The brother was saying that Malcolm X was nobody before he joined the Nation of Islam. But I don't agree with the Nation of Islam. They are separatists."

Yassin Iqbal: "I don't think Brother Hattin was saying we should join the Nation of Islam to follow Malcolm X. He was talking about Islamic influence."

Mehboob Kaur: "But which Malcolm X was he talking about? Malcolm left the Nation of Islam to become an orthodox Muslim."

Omar Hadsa: "He changed his name to Malik el-Shabazz."

Mehboob Kaur: "He said he wanted to work with white people as well. He started to believe in integration."

Salim Nadim, giggling, adds: "Brother Hattin was examining a very big subject. How, over tea, can we hope to understand the influence of Malcolm X?"

At this point, I confess, I succumbed to hysterical laughter. Kaur inquired as to the reason for my outburst. I told him I remembered having a similar conversation about Malcolm X — like many teenagers in the late 1980s who discovered Public Enemy's influential *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* — with my Scottish friends.

Kaur flashes an embarrassed grin. "I cannot talk to my imam about Malcolm X," he says. "My imam has probably never heard of him. My imam just wants to discuss the war on terror."

His friend Omar Hadsa also speaks of his disquiet with his local imam. "I was having problems with the police," he said. Over the past year he had been stopped and searched 25 times "I am sure it is because of my beard. I asked my imam if I should hire a lawyer and complain. After all, I was being stopped every two weeks for up to half an hour. He was useless. He told me to pray to Allah. But the police are not stopping Allah: they are stopping me. In the end I had to ask a family friend for advice."

The Muslim College in Ealing is taking a prominent position in the local training for British imams. It offers a diploma in Islamic Studies in collaboration with Birkbeck College. The curriculum is non-sectarian and emphasises a textual, as opposed to a literal, interpretation of the Koran. Women are admitted and wearing the hijab is optional. The syllabus also highlights the significance of analytical skills, and the need to relate religious values to an allembracing British experience.

Inter-faith discourse, administrative skills and history form the cornerstones of lectures. Dr Zaki Badawi, the head and founder of the college, hopes that mosques, before hiring any imam, will eventually demand a certificate of studies. The Markfield Institute of Higher Education in Leicestershire is Britain's second training school for imams. In league with the Islamic Foundation, a 50-year-old centre of Islamic education, the Markfield offers a postgraduate degree programme in association with Loughborough University.

Both schools, though, have a near-insurmountable task ahead of them: how to navigate the thorny issue of tribal allegiances that leads to the selection of most imams in the first place. Together, the Markfield Institute and the Muslim College produce only 50 graduates annually.

A further 30 seminaries operate in Britain, many offering a more traditional view of Islam centred in the Middle East or Pakistan. The imams often emerge from classes that have been imported intact from the Islamic world, and all instruction is given in Arabic or Urdu. To add to the confusion, employment conditions are in desperate need of evolution. Typically imams have no employment contract, no pension and often no regular salary. The income provided by mosques is generally inadequate: a newly hired imam can expect to earn around £10,000 a year. And while the wages might seem attractive to someone recruited from a Pakistani village, a career marked by poverty is unlikely to tempt well-educated, British-born Muslims away from commerce, medicine and information technology.

"The system is in need of a practical shake-up," says Badawi. "British Muslims have reached every echelon of society. We must attract that band of British Muslims, the high achievers, into mosques. Already we are seeing signs that, like British churches, attendances at mosques are falling. The decline can be stopped only by attracting professionals."

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