

## Introduction: The New Muslims

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In their pathbreaking report published in 1997, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, Runnymede examined the growth, features and consequences of anti-Muslim racism in Britain. The report warned then about the dangers of ‘closed’ views of Islam and Muslims, and pressured for a more ‘open’ perspective and dialogue, not only as a way of countering anti-Muslim racism but as a necessity ‘for the well-being of society as a whole’. Sixteen years on, it seems that the challenge remains as vital today as it did then – perhaps even more so.

The past two decades have seen an explosion of interest in Muslim communities in Britain and Europe. Migration and demographic change have contributed to a growing Muslim presence in Europe, while the context of the global War on Terror and the resurgence of mainstream right-wing and Far Right political parties across Europe has fed heated discussions around the so-called ‘clash of civilizations’, the borders and identity of ‘Fortress Europe’ and the possibilities and limits of citizenship.

In the wake of the 2001 ‘riots’ and the terror attacks of 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005, Britain has experienced an intense political, media and policy scrutiny of British Muslims. These three events have triggered a two-fold approach to ‘managing’ Muslims – with a focus on securitization and migration control at the borders, and, internally, on issues of integration, cohesion and citizenship. Such policies have impacted on all dimensions of Muslim life, from travel ‘back home’ to the intimacies of marriage and family formation, from schools to prisons, from political protest to religious practice, from internet usage to stop and search, from friendships to mode of dress.

On the one hand, the focus on religion, culture and community has marked Muslims out as

distinct from the larger political, social and cultural landscape of 21st-century Britain, and any broader struggle for racial equality and justice. On the other hand, Muslims have found themselves homogenized and ‘flattened’ into a single category or ‘community’ defined solely through faith, which is itself a shorthand for a range of pathologies. Such understandings not only ignore the internal diversity of ‘Muslims’ – whether around ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, age, religiosity, region and so on – but also erase the complex ways in which Muslim identities are lived.

The ‘facts’ about Muslims in Britain themselves challenge us to think anew. The 2011 Census, for example, reveals a growing number of Muslims, but also a changing trajectory in the ethnic make-up and patterns of Muslim settlement in the UK. An increase in Muslims living in areas outside cities gives rise to new contexts and textures for Muslim life. How Muslims connect with new environments, as well as with fellow Muslims and non-Muslims across spaces of old and new settlement, minority and majority communities, prompts us to rethink assumptions about ‘parallel lives’ and community cohesion. Similarly, the engagement of a new generation of British Muslims with forms of political and social action around issues of faith – as well as other struggles for social justice – suggests an urgent need to rethink outmoded and simplistic ideas of religion, culture, ethnicity and difference.

Our aim in this collection is to challenge the ways in which ‘Muslims’ as a social category are imagined in popular, policy and even some academic circles. The title ‘New Muslims’ indexes both this conceptual shift and the changing contours of ‘the Muslim community’ in 21st-century Britain. It argues for renewed assessments of Muslims in Britain today – beyond

the discourses of securitization, segregation or sharia law – to recognize the multidimensionality of Muslim lives and their place within a broader struggle for equality, citizenship and social justice.

## The Muslim Question and The New Muslims

This collection originates from a recent workshop on *The New Muslims* and a panel debate on *The Muslim Question*, both held in March 2013 at the University of Manchester. In *Section I: The Muslim Question*, four scholars working on Muslim identities, from a range of perspectives, explore and challenge dominant discourses around Muslim identities in the UK.<sup>1</sup> In *Section II: The New Muslims*, we bring together established and emerging scholars to present research that unsettles the conventional understanding of Muslim identities in Britain and its diaspora – research that provides unexpected and challenging insights into how we think (about) Muslims. The work presented here points to the

multiple levels at which Muslim identities must be understood, from transnational connections, to national representations (and the precarity of British Muslim citizenships) and the local formations of Muslim life.

The emphasis here is very much on placing Muslim lives and identities *in context* through exploring the everyday places in which British Muslims live – cities, schools, youth clubs – and some more surprising points of access – the army, radio stations, cars – all offering alternative starting-points for the unravelling of Muslim identities. While we can only gesture here towards some of the richness of this and other academic work in the field, we hope that this collection will challenge, provoke and inspire others to think differently about the question of Muslims in Britain.

## Notes

1 A film on ‘The Muslim Question’ can be viewed at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jFl1jFZk\\_c](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jFl1jFZk_c).

