

# Street Salafism: Contingency and urbanity as religious creed

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/epd](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/epd)**Ajmal Hussain**

The University of Warwick, UK

## Abstract

Muslims living in European cities have come under increased public scrutiny over the past two decades for alleged links with overseas governments as sponsors of extremism. Media representations such as the documentary ‘Undercover Mosque’ that aired on a British television channel in 2007 is a poignant example of how the banal, everyday life of religious spaces can be folded into – while also give succour to – such narratives. Against the backdrop of such constraints, young Muslim men who identify as Salafi, inhabit the same street featured in the documentary with its dense and evolving Islamic infrastructure, in ways that evade easy capture of authorial gazes as well as local sensibilities of what it means to be Muslim. They do so through a hermeneutical method that I describe here as *street Salafism*. This involves a range of corporeal strategies that enable them to exist in and beyond the material and narrative life of the street that is seen as determining of them. In doing so, street Salafism reveals new ontological conditions of difference that test the limits, but also possibilities, for multicultural life in diverse cities such as the case described here.

## Keywords

Muslims, urban, street, multicultural, Salafism, difference

## Introduction

In January 2007 the part public-funded British television broadcaster Channel 4 aired a documentary entitled ‘Undercover Mosque’. The 45 minutes of grainy video footage and muffled sound from a hidden camera and mic that moved between two mosques on an inner-city Birmingham street helped popularise an image of the city as home to British Muslim institutions where extremism is preached. It was claimed that these mosques and the ideology they pushed were promoted by Saudi Arabia, which has a decades long association with overseas Muslims through petrodollar funding. Saudi benevolence in

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### Corresponding author:

Ajmal Hussain, The University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 8UW, UK.

Email: [ajmal.hussain@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:ajmal.hussain@warwick.ac.uk)

funding the spread of what has come to be known as Salafist Islam has involved a concerted effort of moving people and ideas to and from the Kingdom, through the sponsorship of English language publications and higher education for western Muslims (Hammond, 2018). The flow between Saudi Arabia, UK and also USA where young Muslims have attended universities for training to become *'da'ees'* (people who invite to Islam) (Birt, 2005; (Grewal, 2014) has since attracted negative attention, witnessed in the emboldened sense of journalistic and police freedom to gaze, depict and police the streets of Muslim Britain under the guise of the so-called 'War on Terror' (Hussain, 2014; Kundnani, 2009). Accompanying this scopic regime of surveilling dangerous others is the idea that multiculturalism as the paradigm suggesting culturally different groups can live together, is a failed project (Amin, 2002; Bhattacharyya, 2008) in which the area's homogeneity as a 'no-go zone for non-Muslims'<sup>1</sup> is evoked to represent this failure.

The Muslim experience has, thus, become one of a racialised group where processes of racialisation rely on depictions of place emerging at the intersection of representation and crisis. Stuart Hall's adumbration of the 'black colony' (Hall et al., 1978) is a precursor for understanding the way people and place could be racialised through the workings of media and state institutions. The portrayal of the street in this documentary is a contemporary instance of how through invocations of their public presence, Muslims have come to represent a new source of moral panic in the UK, reflected in complaints about the 'death of multiculturalism' whereby religious identification is said to trance ethnicity and culture as markers of identity and community consolidation. This charge has applied to Muslims who because of their heterogeneity in terms of race and ethnicity elide forms of identification that promised representation within paradigms of race relations or managing difference in the UK. Paradoxically, however, despite existing in a vacuous space in terms of recognition and political representation, Muslims occupy a central position in the vast policy, security and surveillance apparatus that targets them in order to mitigate against erosions of Britishness (Croft, 2012).

The publicness of Muslims, then, not only disrupts sensibilities of race relations that centre ethnicity and culture, but also challenges assumptions about the sacred/profane binary underpinning the liberal state (Asad, 1993). Indeed, their representation as contemporary folk devils is a re-formatting of pathologies associated with Asian and black masculinities (Alexander, 2000). Yet these signifiers remain part of multiple identifications that Muslims actually have, and like manifestations of racism that shift over time, so does the practice of anti-race, revealing a complex dynamic of relationality across spatial and temporal zones (Goldberg, 2009). So, while Muslims may be racialised according to familiar logics of people, place and danger, they also elide raciality; taking from it certain tropes such as associations with place that facilitate consolidation, while also enacting a range of urban manoeuvres to challenge the normative homogenising and exclusionary functions of public and policy attention. The optic on this street – the representation of it and, as I will describe below, the way it is inhabited despite and in-spite of this – is a reflection of the contemporary Muslim predicament where conflicts around spatial presence have become the prism through which Muslims are increasingly apprehended (Gole, 2013).

Salafis – who are a salient representation of Muslims, because of their visibility, remain a marginal aspect in the overall demography of Muslims in the west, despite the growing allure of this strand of Islam among youth (Inge, 2016). Beyond numbers, the marginality of Salafism owes much to a distinct religious 'creed' that is said to bind adherents into a movement (Wiktorwicz, 2006). Here, Salafism is remarked upon as a highly doctrinal version of Islam that is canonised or instrumentalised (March, 2015; Roy, 2017) toward political ends. Yet it is also considered for its quietist or apolitical influence in everyday

religiosity (Ramadan, 1999) where the obscurity, coupled with public scepticism toward Islam as a foreign religion not so much lends Salafism to being an occult phenomenon, but something radical to be distinguished from the already existing ground of Islam in the UK (Hamid, 2016).

In its etymology, Salafism, or *Salafiyya* as some adherents prefer to call it, implies an association with the *Salaf*, who are considered the first generation of Muslims having lived among the prophet Muhammad. Recent scholarship has noted that the term first came into use in the early 1920s after being coined by the French orientalist Louis Massignon (Lauziere, 2016: 22). For many of Salafism's adherents, however, it is the genealogy that matters, being able to trace historically their links to the foundation of the religion by pinning its significance to different epochs in time and space. Subsequently, one can draw a link between a series of popular scholars from the medieval period through to the modern as linchpins in the enterprise of Salafism (Anjum, 2016: 449–450; Lauziere, 2016: 1–25). It is not surprising, then, that much of the talk about Salafism is in a doctrinal sense. This view is prevalent in discussions of political Islam or Islamism where Salafi doctrine lends itself to being adopted by jihadis and radicalists (Halverson, 2010).<sup>2</sup> In such commentary, a prominent characteristic of the Salafi worldview is the duality or oppositional nature of it when distilled into discussions about creed<sup>3</sup> vs. discourse or rational theology (Anjum, 2012; Halverson, 2010; Koning, 2014; Wiktorwicz, 2006). Distilling beliefs and actions in(to) a creedal fashion involves shrinking the doctrine to what is or is not appropriate. Hamid describes this outcome as 'rationalised Islam' (Hamid, 2016: 59). The distillation to creed represents a move from the universal to the particular, where the universal message in the broader corpus of theology is shunned in favour of the utility of *creed*. In this, *manhaj* (interpretive method) is a key *heuristic device* that makes use of oppositional dialectics to dismiss what lies outside the creed as innovation (*bida*) while defining its core (*aqida*). This is represented in the disentanglement of creed from *taqlid* (tradition) as a cornerstone of Salafism; that in order to claim an unfettered link to the Salaf it shuns association with the major schools of Islamic thought (*madhab*) (Anjum, 2012; Lauziere, 2016; Mouline, 2014). Salafism, or its synonym *Wahhabism*,<sup>4</sup> which signifies a break with certain folk practices said to have mired the transmission of orthodox Islam, stands out as a reconfiguring force on the shifting landscape of Islamic identity and practice in various postcolonial Muslim societies (Iqtidar, 2011; Maqsood, 2017).

There is, thus, ambiguity at play at the heart of what it means to be Salafi, conveyed in the words of one street Salafi I worked with. When I asked Abu Yahya, a young Somali who had spent a year at a university in Saudi Arabia what he thought about Saudi connotations with the area, he replied: 'I don't think it matters or makes a difference. We are Salafis *here*, and we *do* what we need to do' (emphasis mine). He also sought to displace the idea of Saudi as the epicentre of global Salafism by a follow-up suggestion; that being Salafi is a disposition of people who 'want to question' (the common sense). Here he was leading me to discover what is going on *besides* (Simone, 2019) the hype.

## Territoriality and hermeneutics

This paper draws on ethnographic research carried out between November 2017 and June 2019 on the same street in Birmingham UK, featured in the Dispatches 'Undercover Mosque'. In many ways the street is typical of high streets in areas of dense Muslim population across the UK, where significant ethnic infrastructure exists as a result of various waves of migration from Commonwealth countries to metropolitan areas since the middle of the last century. In the case of Birmingham, this presence is amplified when considering

that the city has the largest population of Muslims for any UK municipality, in turn making it the site of further arrival of Muslims from within the UK and EU. The street is also where Salafi Publications is located; a prominent bookstore and resource centre considered a first point of contact for people interested in Salafism from around world.

I draw on regular events I participated in with a group of males aged between 16 and 27, from a range of ethnic backgrounds including Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian, Somali, Arab and Maghrebi – all of whom identified as Salafi. In particular, I draw on encounters with five men who were key crew members and through whom I met numerous others, who in turn led me into other liminal spaces around the city. Although the people I worked with regularly encountered interest from ‘outsiders’, they usually engaged them with a view to doing *dawah*. In my case, being a fellow ‘believer’ enabled me access to internal debates and deliberations, as well as insights to the way religious authority is negotiated among street Salafis.

The street, with its various codes (Anderson, 1999) and establishments, offers a ‘level of abstraction’ (Hall, 1986: 12) for witnessing ‘street Salafism’ as a hermeneutical method, made up of a range of improvisations that generate opportunities for interaction among people and space. This, I argue, amounts to a form of critique of the already existing multicultural settlement of the city with its racialised connotations of place that enable representations of the city as a ‘no go zone’ for non-Muslims to ‘stick’ (Ahmed, 2004: 92). As I will try to show below, the condition of racialisation and surveillance as mixed in with particulars of the street resonant of Muslims, are re-formatted through specific doings, which become a method of inhabitation of territory. I shed light on the street as a site of alterity that is both determining of their otherness *and* enabling of a response to this. Thus, street Salafism as method helps challenge their racialisation, as a response to the conditions under which those racialised exist. The street, therefore, is a generative arena for enabling unanticipated recognitions of Muslim practice – not conventionally understood in terms of anti-race, for example. Because Salafis generally consider themselves to be apolitical, we might consider the response of street Salafis to being racialised and policed bio-politically as enacted through different vernaculars rather than protest and antagonism, and through sensibilities of negotiation and movement as a hermeneutical practice, then, which becomes a response akin to anti-race.

In this sense, street Salafism also represents a transformation of multiculturalism as it is lived in the city. Through their collaborative, multifarious, everyday practices, street Salafis complicate conventional wisdom about religious identity and community as territorialised, embodied in solid space such as church, mosque or neighbourhood. The permeability that exists between identifiable spaces of religion and adjacent ‘secular’ spaces of cultural production and consumption, therefore, raises important ontological questions about what constitutes a religious group contemporaneously and what are its constituent or defining aspects. Through the aesthetics and ethics that they advance, street Salafis represent new forms of knowledge about contemporary blackness/difference or racialised otherness, where the street should not be taken as a static site of their presence. Their contingent and inprocess nature help to unsettle the certainty or predictability that pervade discourses on Muslims and Islam as oriented toward things predetermined; such as sharia law, family and customs, for example. They articulate something different about the capacity to constitute oneself, which requires suturing multiple strands of the spatial in materialising Salafism. This also points to the value and importance of techniques for critical analysis such as participant observation, field research and interviews that help surpass representation encoded in familiar vernaculars of Muslimness.

Critique, which is often associated with literary work, here is practised through corporeal registers of dialogue and movement in banal moments of everyday life. It becomes a unique assemblage of agency and moral action that expands Salafism – beyond ideology and

normative alliance with Saudi Arabia – to incorporate corporeal registers of action that signal a concern with living out the religion as opposed to merely adopting the creed. More specifically, for the group of young men I worked with, street Salafism becomes a particular method for inhabiting the neighbourhood and its racialised condition as a place of difference and danger that has accompanied the War on Terror. It, therefore, interacts with public culture in unexpected ways, particularly through mobilising authority in spaces and moments considered inimical to religion.

Thinking about critique in a more contingent sense, by being attuned to where one is, one's location or situatedness (Scott, 2006: 136) means we tap into dispositions that are exploratory, messy, playful and provisional (Amin, 2015). Indeed, many of the young people I worked with escape the mosques and madrasas for the unpredictable encounters the street affords; as one 19-year-old at the time informed me:

when we used to learn things in the madrasa, it was like a hint for us to say, 'Hang on. Learning in the madrasa is not enough – we have to learn outside as well. see what's happening, and then put two and two together and work from there'. (Mo John)

This points to the inquisitive and speculative nature of being a young Muslim contemporaneously (Bayat and Herrera, 2010). In my case, the young people I worked with were conscious that in this area Salafi mosques were in ascendance and that this was attracting the wrong kind of attention. The street and larger neighbourhood were homogenised as a place of extremist Islam, and that these considerations combined to form judgements about Muslims that are used to 'sort' them (Amin, 2010). Thus, street Salafis sought to do and bring something new to the area, which makes use of existing infrastructure in terms of mosques and spaces of consumption on the street as sites of assembly and networking. At the same time being conscious of the area's negative depictions would incite them to venture into more 'neutral' – in terms of racially marked – spaces of the city, such as the city centre, in turn exposing them to new forms of intrigue and suspicion. Abu Yahya, a key interlocutor in this research elaborated on this dialogical aspect:

So, some people would come to me, and they'd be curious about Islam. 'What is it that you people are about?' Some people would also be curious, but in the opposite kind of way . . . so they'll ask you questions like, 'Why . . .' about terrorism, for example, as if you're responsible for it, or, you know, that kind of thing. Eventually, once they start talking, they understand that you can have a civilised conversation and come to a common understanding.

Seeking common ground was achieved by being in the city centre as a heterogenous space where difference could be harmonised. It also signals their attuning to liberal virtues such as freedom to choose, speak and assemble that are often seen as inimical to Muslims and Islam. While being Salafi, then, places these young people in the public gaze, it also provides a means of interaction with curious others. In this, street Salafis employ a range of urban manoeuvres as part of the method for inhabiting a distinct time and space of the street. This I suggest points to Salafism as an ontological condition; recalibrating it in relation to global determinants such as Saudi Arabia, while implicating it in more familiar time and space.

## **Navigating the gaze**

The *street* exists variously in relation to Muslims, traditionally in iterations of the Arab street as a distinct milieu where modernity has mixed with peoples of the Middle East in

expressions of cosmopolitanism (Zubaida, 2006). There has been a romantic recalling of the conviviality of urban Cairo and Beirut as places that hosted Muslim reformists in the nineteenth century whom Lauziere (2016) in his authoritative study on the making of Salafism classifies as predecessors to the current Salafism. Recent political turmoil in the Middle East has meant the *Arab* street has become notorious as *Muslim* street.<sup>5</sup> In the UK, as in other western European contexts, Muslims have been folded into the racialised urban imaginary of the inner-city as places of dense mono-culture (Hussain, 2019) where the street is valorised as a place of deviancy (Baker, 2017).

The street more generally made up of its variegated economies, in turn a result of old and new migration, is often considered marginal to the broader life of the city, because it is constituted of minorities (Hall, 2017). In my case it is referred to as the ‘hot spot’, because of the coalescing of various gazes, peoples, agencies and ventures. Syed described it as such: ‘I think this area and the road has kind of risen throughout the years. There’s been an increase of different people and businesses that’s made it a key place for Salafis to meet, pass through and even settle.’ The marginality of this ethnic enclave is challenged as it becomes the refuge for newcomers from other cities and from Europe who are escaping the stigma associated with being Muslim. French-Maghrebis, for example, find a base for selling Francophone goods while southerners bring new finance after selling up in the capital, as well as to escape the differently racialised and violent streets of London.<sup>6</sup>

Previously, scholars have written about this area and the street as the ground upon which ritual Sufi processions amounted to a ‘sacralizing of space’ (Werbner, 1996) or more recently a ‘third space’ that offers young people existential opportunities for making sense of Muslim identity (Shannahan, 2011). Indeed, when thinking about space in relation to Muslims, it is common to imagine formal spaces whose materiality is celebrated as ornament and their function as containers of ritual, while the makeshift and contingent nature of these is often overlooked (Jones, 2019). The street – for Salafi young men I worked with – represented something else *besides*, as they sought not to overturn or challenge the status-quo of what is normative in the way of religion and community here, but to be ‘on par’ (Simone, 2019). This is evident in how they interpret the present conjuncture – extremism, securitisation – suggesting that it is not a site of privilege for them as it may have been for earlier generations who established prominent places of worship, in turn grafting Muslims and Islam on to the city’s multicultural landscape (Gale, 2004).

There are, therefore, new tensions, invisibilities and avoidances that make people not want to be identified as inhabitant *writ* Muslim. In this sense the street is also described as ‘hot’. People operate through different strategies so as not to valorise the negativity that has accompanied the media and security services attention. A key traversal was refusing to talk about extremism or radicalisation in order to avoid being folded into it. In this environment, the practice of being Salafi becomes a virtuous act in relation to the conventional authority of Islam expressed as cultural – enabling it to be incorporated in multiculturalism – and the gaze of the media and security services that criminalises them. The virtues of this street emerge from the authority – gained through its notoriety and place in people’s minds as a Muslim ‘hot spot’ – and how this, then, inflects, shapes, prompts and inspires a different type of practice. Whether of businesses serving people of the Salafi disposition, to all-night cheap consumption, more than just hosting these resources there are new norms that are set out, such as the banishing of sheesha and massage parlours, and instituting in their place cafes and canteens as makeshift spaces for communing. This history and materiality combine to make the *street* rather than the Islamic infrastructure *per se* a virtuous site to be in. So, new migrants and new money flows into the area disrupting the authoritative hold of South Asian Islam and the linear progression of new trends of consumption that appeal to

emerging generations of Muslims – visible in the ‘halal economy’ that the city is fast becoming known for.

Existing in this atmosphere of heightened visibility, and moving through the dense Islamic infrastructure of the neighbourhood means there is a constant management required or keeping in view the challenges to operating on this street. One strategy among street Salafis I worked with was to operate under the cover of dark. Minnie, for example, was conspicuous through his appearance – dressed in a two-piece shalwar kameez (a loose-fitting tunic that comes down to the knees and baggy trousers) and always clenching a religious book – in a way that would lend him to being understood as a street pastor. He is, in fact, not trained to be an *Imam* (leader) but was more of a headman who gathers individuals from local university and college Islamic societies, snooker halls, mosques and random street encounters to create a local assemblage that helped him to project a certain prestige. During the course of this fieldwork we met regularly on the street, either early morning or late night as he passed through to and from home. He would choose only to stay on the street long enough to gain something from being there. One key virtue of being here was to make connections.

The fleeting nature of his existence here might imply that nothing is really ‘going on’, because he is constantly moving between meetings or events. Yet, through his ‘footwork’ (Simone, 2019) a rhythm is formed made from temporality, disjointed presence and absence, in and out under the cover of darkness. Being constantly on the move and having no set space or time from which to operate meant that it was difficult to form a structure akin to the officially visible and recognisable infrastructure of Islam on the street. We discussed how such transience appealed to many young people who sought simplified ‘bite size’ teachings about Islam. He acknowledged that this could leave young people in an uncertain situation to perform their own *ijtihad* (interpretation), a concern also echoed by official religious establishments who felt they were not keeping up with contemporary street trends and, therefore, welcomed alternative efforts such as Minnie’s that kept young people connected to the Islamic infrastructure – more broadly through the setting of the street.

The method through which Minnie and numerous other young people whom I interviewed inhabit this area involved being here but also not. Through a form of *oscillation* (Simone, 2018) they negotiate being among the Muslim infrastructure, which during certain times of the day and week offers a cover for them to retreat into. One key space through which Minnie sought to hold individuals together is a late-night gathering held each Friday in one of the few restaurants that open into the early hours of the morning. It attracts young people from different backgrounds and positions in what they referred to as *imaan* (level of belief). Some are solidly in the believing zone, others have floated in and out, still others are not sure why they were attending. The regularity of the Friday night gatherings – in the same place, same time – is an attempt to challenge the absence of structure that their oscillation inflicts. Therefore, repetition is necessary, through which a rhythm is established. This in turn is facilitated by ‘Salafi shortcuts’ that help to challenge the regimental Islam of the earlier generations. The shortcuts enable an adoption of random spaces and times for prayer, for example, making the *deen* (religion) less institutionalised. It also means that technology can be part of the interactions where in other spaces and times such as congregational prayers, sermons or structured learning sessions, it is muted or has to be silenced. Lounging in a part of the restaurant completely taken over by the group, they are at ease to Google contentious and questionable issues, introducing other ideas and images into the mix.

I participated in these gatherings regularly for over a year from November 2017. The meetings were a space where speculation runs abound. The evening is filled with buoyant

banter, debates, arguments and discussions – mostly about others’ transgressions. There were always one or two young men sitting alone not willing or ready to partake in discussions, but only the food. Being here – a restaurant in an undesirable part of the neighbourhood, late at night – offers some respite from having nothing to do in the day and returning home with nothing to contribute to home life. This regular event, then, on the same street each Friday night, becomes one moment between different ‘thresholds of life’ (Richoud and Amin, 2019).<sup>7</sup> What binds them is the street – they all visit and socialise here. Even if they live and work in different areas they make an effort to come here, connect with others, staying until late, getting away in time to catch the last bus or occasionally staying the night in a room above the mosque and getting the first bus in the morning.

For many of the young men who were part of these gatherings, participation was about escaping locally inflected sensibilities of living in the ‘hood’. The gatherings became vital moments and spaces for nurturing reflexivity and becoming conscious of a moral duty to engage the world. The events helped to activate Muslim agency in a moralistic rather than identitarian sense based on cultural and ethnic distinctions. For example, Minnie’s aspiration to differentiate himself and his work from the common sensical, which he dismissed as ritualist and culturalist, lies in the claim that his gatherings as ‘spaces for discussion and debate’ were more intellectual. Building a relationship to text and knowledge through emphasising criticality and deliberation is intended to help street Salafis break away from the hold of parochial identity and connect more with a broader and even global sense of Muslimness (Maqsood, 2017: 137). The reflexivity inherent in the staging of activities presents a challenge to the common-sense, therefore:

it’s the approach that is different. The approach that you take in the masjid, compared to say with your friends or in a coffee shop or social setting... you go to the masjid and there’s a scholar, shaykh, there’s a book, he’s reading out of a book or he’s telling you things that he’s read or he’s learnt from his teachers, and there’s no dialogue, there’s no discussion. it’s just simply, it’s there accept it. Whereas outside you have more of a freedom. Young people are not as brave in terms of having those dialogues. (Abu Yahya)

The street, then, offers various virtues. Helping to assemble disparate individuals and influences but all the time under the gaze of restaurant owners and waiters already on the lookout for behaviors that might render their establishment within the scopic gaze of the security services. During the course of my research with street Salafis, we moved across five different restaurants as part of efforts to escape the ‘see something, say something’ type security ritual that pervades nationalist politics in the US as well as UK (Kumar, 2018). There was a constant atmosphere of being open to but also watching over one’s shoulder that street Salafis had to attune to. Minnie, as organiser was skilled at handling this; muting conversations when they were getting ‘hot’, and altogether wrapping things up when too-much ‘heat’ was generated. One night a newcomer was in the space, claiming to have just returned from the Yemen doing humanitarian work. He relayed vivid stories ‘from the battlefield’ as he proclaimed. We noticed one of the young men present to be particularly affected by this account, evident in his display of excitement and interest, which in turn attracted the attention of waiters and other diners, leading to an undesired optic being placed on our group. Minnie was unsuccessful in switching the conversation and so suggested we leave. The group of men, then, spilled out to the street, on the pavement outside for a while, and then into cars. The street became the site of potentialities; for tempering the mood, a matrix for disappearing into and onto somewhere else.



## Dawah – bringing deen to the street

While street Salafis are visible in terms of surveillance and capture in media representations, they seek also to evade these by going beyond them momentarily into the city and moving outside established spaces of religion and codified practices that make them (and the street) identifiable. The refusal to be limited to the neighbourhood manifested in movement off the street and into the public life of the city. This transgression – traversing the ‘hood’ into the public gaze – also challenged the scopic regime of anti-terror that casts a suspect gaze on visibly Salafi Muslims. Commentators concerned with the impact of counter-radicalisation policies on Muslims have described the emergence of ‘policed multiculturalism’ (Ragazzi, 2015: 163) as the new concern that is less about pluralism and citizenship and more about security, leading to alienation and exclusion on the part of Muslim communities. For street Salafis this racialised condition becomes a cover beneath which things go on that reflect a sense of anomie too; expressed in their resistance to the insistence about who or what they are. Rather than be policed they engage with the discourses and practices that seek to produce them as suspect bodies. In this, *dawah* – inviting people to know about Islam – was their strategy. It enables dialogue and critique, which becomes a regular frame for engagement with the broader city – while also an aspiration that may even help change it and make it habitable for Muslims as a suspect community. Their opacity, then, becomes a different kind of cover, one that gives license to continue and do more; to improvise.

In addition to the Friday evening gatherings, I participated in regular Saturday afternoon ‘dawah walkabouts’ in the city centre of Birmingham that culminated in a gathering at a set coffee shop around 5 pm. This event was popular during the longer days of the year and was deliberately staged then so as to enable encounters with the general public. This is a different rendering of *dawah* compared to it as a peer-based learning movement that assumes it to be akin to proselytism or ‘obligatory preaching’ (Kenny, 2018: 10), therefore, ascribing to it a normative interpretation. Instead, *dawah* as embodied practice has a longer genealogy, typically represented in the South Asian transnational movement of *Tablighi Jamaat* (Metcalf and Daly, 2002) for whom *dawah* is an Arabic rendition of the Urdu word *dawat*, which means invitation. It also finds expression in different modalities of circulation such as cassette sermons that work on different sensorium (Hirschkind, 2006). For street Salafis, *dawah* is both cultivated and enacted through a distinct urban vernacular of corporeality and dialogue. Its affective resonance was gained through modes of transmission focused on being visible and also diffuse – in contrast to being stationed somewhere or officially conducted; making their *dawah* on the move and, therefore, less able to represent or police. It is also haphazard, containing shards of different efforts with people independently doing their own thing.

When these young men appear together each Saturday afternoon, their presence resembles that of a ‘gang’ (Alexander, 2000) – embodying popular representations of visibly different young men as a disruptive and raucous public presence. Street Salafis were conscious that their appearance as Muslims made them appear out of place even in the city centre of multicultural Birmingham.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, their dress was deliberate so as to ‘differentiate oneself from the non-believers’ as Abu Yahya informed me. Their public presence in visibly Islamic attire, then, is an embodied motive similar to the wearing of the veil in France – to make themselves *appear* (Gole, 2002, 2013; Piela, 2019). More than this, their presence in the city centre was intended to challenge criticisms of Muslims and Islam as being ‘out of time’ (Mas, 2018: 211) in relation to modern or liberal values, through laying claim to these also. Thus, they would bleed into what they see as the secular time of Saturday afternoon shopping in the city centre through deliberately convening a *halakah* or study circle at a

prominent city centre coffee shop. In doing this, they are spurred on by feelings of entitlement to full citizenship in a polity, which while hostile to them offers freedom of expression.

This is managed through a stylised visage that takes from American black street cultures such as basketball shoes worn over a thobe and hoodie that can be purchased in mainstream outlets across town. When wearing these they are viewed as hip and alternative as they share space with buskers, street dancers and exhibitionists, evangelical preachers and perfume sellers dotted around the city centre. The embodied presence of street Salafis in the city centre is not only an aesthetic incursion into the public life of the city, then, but through the tactics of dialogue and deliberation they engage strangers so that the broader public can get to know about what informs their lives. In the process they seek to affect different sensibilities toward Muslims and Islam:

I suppose the objectives are to change the image of . . . the image in people's minds and hearts. To make people think, you know, we're doing good and then maybe people will accept us. it's not so much to convert people. I think more to do with, to give a good image for the Muslims, that we're part of society, that we're committed to helping people out and we're the good guys, not the bad guys. You don't need to be afraid of us. (Minnie)

This endeavour involves making shrewd calculations such as 'where to meet?'. The more modern establishments are preferred, because they are busy and so their communing generates a convivial mood. The city centre, while presenting the possibility of confrontation with 'secular' citizens, also offers an opening for dialogue, and this is what street Salafis seek. It enables them to enact democratic plural citizenship. Being in public in the form of a 'gang' helped them to stage a disruptive presence. On a number of occasions while in the city centre I witnessed passersby express unease at the sound of Quranic recitation being projected from sound system speakers at one of the 'dawah stalls' positioned outside a busy shopping mall. Pilkington (2016: 135–136) notes the force that this impression of Islam – as being in ascendance, hostile and aggressive, in the form of seeking conversions for example – has on EDL activists whose anti-Islam sentiments were a driving force of their politics. I asked Abu Yahya how people's unease made him feel. In response he pointed to a group of Christian preachers stationed a few yards away holding a megaphone and remarked that: 'it's freedom of expression'. This invocation to liberalism was enough for him, so as *not* to make it the dominant frame of our discussion – as if 'we should be talking about rights and privileges, like, Muslims should be grateful to be here'? (Abu Yahya). Instead we discussed the virtues of public spaces that are plural and accepting. For Abu Yahya, his adoption of the liberal virtue of freedom to speak and assemble was not about uncritical celebration of humanism, but offered a mechanism through which to interrogate the hostility Muslims face in public life or the 'age of offence' as he calls it.

The desire to engage in polemics, debate and discussion about liberal virtues of inclusion, is an effect of the democratic dilemma faced by Muslims relating to their inclusion as citizens who enjoy legal protection for their religious minority status (Doyle, 2013). Feeling that this is a thorny issue (experienced through Islamophobia) and that identity or interest-based politics has not enabled a resolution, street Salafis enact their own stage for critique and discussion in contrast to the formal arena of politics. This is done through deliberation and affecting sentiments through embodied acts of dawah in the city centre. In doing so, street Salafis are not seeking to usurp the hegemonic (for them writ secular or atheist) power that is making the city/nation/world a hostile place for the 'faithful' (Pew Research Center, 2019). Their ambitions are more modest. It is to have a space or to be a force among all else that is going on in the busy city centre. They are not claiming

a space within the arena of identity politics, but they seek through embodied practices of dialogue to compete in the cultural politics of difference as it is lived in the form of ‘multicultural drift’ (Hall, 2000).

While the presence and embodied actions of street Salafis in the city centre help transform this as a public (Gole, 2013), relations with non-Muslims and the broader life of the city are important in helping shape a sense of Muslimness too. For Isaac who had recently been released from prison having converted to Islam there, the city centre dawah walkabouts are a key opportunity to connect with fellow Muslims, many of whom are also converts, and to have his questions answered as he continues to fashion a Muslim self. More importantly he suggested that being in this group would help him avoid getting caught in situations that could result in his return to prison. The street Salafis, thus, offered Isaac a regular time and space in the city that was crucial to his emergent sense of Muslimness.

Being Salafi, then, provides an opening to question certain aspects of their (inherited) faith and its life in public. Street Salafis’ lament for identity or interest-based politics is another instance of this critical disposition, expressed in how the demography of the city has changed such that Muslims and other racialised communities are no longer viewed as marginal. They see proponents of identity politics to have now receded along with the marginal status of the minority identities they championed. The new reality of Muslims and Islam occupying centre stage in debates about failed multiculturalism and Britishness is an exaltation of this. Street Salafism, then, gives-off a different urgency:

(public campaigns on behalf of Muslims) they’ve lost a lot of meaning. I’m not saying there’s no purpose behind them or there’s no . . . there is definitely, but it’s not as it was when people, you know, when maybe Muslims were a minority, people were more into engaging and discussing, have discussions. Now people just walk past . . . So, methods that were popular back in the days have changed now. Maybe they’re not as popular now, because as time goes on, different methods of interaction need to be used. (Minnie)

A new instance where their public presence finds a less contested existence is in the annual ‘Eid Prayer in the Park’ that takes over an entire neighbourhood of Birmingham attracting tens of thousands of men, women and children. This twice-yearly event has spawned into a day of funfair, food and frolics in one of the city’s large public parks. Market-based rationales of producing value are present in this event where considerable economic gain is made from selling Islamic lifestyle (Atia, 2012). In contrast, the value extracted from street dawah, which is not measurable in economic terms is instead a moral calculation as a duty that is rendered relevant contemporaneously by being understood as volunteering (Philips, 2019). It will ultimately be realised in the after world – but which is spurred on or driven by considerations they have in the profane and the now.

### **Public presence as calculated affect**

Street Salafis enjoy a level of belonging and citizenship expressed in their claims to equality, freedom of choice and assembly, which they demonstrate through asserting themselves in the public sphere. This is further gleaned through their displays of feeling immortal and entitled when in the city centre. Their perceived safety in comparison to their parents’ generations or visibly Muslim women who have been attacked in the streets is evident in how they occupy space. Street Salafis are of the conviction that religion and public reason should be integrated. Hence their public presence is not merely about political justice and

their citizenship right to difference and its recognition, which they claim is the remit of organisations concerned with identity politics. In fact, they shun interest-based politics through a refusal to participate in campaigns against anti-Muslim hate, for example, that rely on registers or grammars of political action that are relativist (O'Toole and Gale, 2010). Instead, these are alternative modes and styles of engagement that bypass what they see as limiting debates about discrimination as all-encompassing of the contemporary Muslim experience. That experience is second-nature, it is the live background or atmosphere to their existence as Muslims in an era of the 'war on terror'. They seek to find a way to live in and through this.

The notion of identity that they see and often criticise other Muslims for campaigning on are dismissed as narrowing the Muslim experience. For them, engagement should be with the *world*, and not a circumscribed arena demarcated as the political. They are concerned about how they are represented in the public eye and so wish to '*influence* this, not *lobby* for it' (Abu Yahya). By asserting themselves in public they are trying to realise the ideal that rights are assumed to be universal and unconditional. When I asked Minnie if he really believed in the universality of the liberal principle of equality despite the evidence for Muslims not being treated equally, he pointed out that if there were a problem it would not be with him as an individual, but with what he stands for, what he is representing: Islam. Therefore, Minnie believed that the public sphere was an open democratic arena where he could 'compete' alongside other opinions and values for a better representation of where he is coming from. Yet, because of the War on Terror and the pervasive counter-terror apparatus of the state, street Salafis are conscious that they enter public space already unequal, being subjected to surveillance and questioning. Given this political hostility to Muslims they must at the same time as seeking influence also exercise *deference* – this echoes the 'ambivalence of egalitarian sentiments' (Asad, 2018: 35) that shape the secular liberal public sphere. Because the multicultural settlement recognises a certain modality of political expression, which they see as identity or interest-based politics, translating themselves is a challenge. Street Salafis, therefore, go public with their passion and dogmatism through engaging discussions and critique about them and their religion, to bring Islam and Muslims back in from a zone of exclusion. This suggests that a key consequence of the death of multiculturalism discourse is that it leaves inadequate space for Muslim praxis to be read and understood on its own terms.

The work of street Salafis exceeds the strategies used in what they see as traditional, institutionalised, anti-discrimination work, a critique of which (Gilroy, 1990) has co-existed along with the emergence of the figure of the Muslim as a politicised identity. The indeterminacy, opacity and evocations of a past are not signs of the foreignness of street Salafism, but points to the limits of the multicultural settlement that privileges liberal vernaculars of identity. They are not content with occupying a siloed identity, whether racialised or culturalist that were the openings for earlier generations to enter the arena of identity politics in the city. Their agonistic stance toward formal politics, means they seek out other ways, spaces and times to operate – in the everyday rather than during ritual election time. For street Salafis the 'War on Terror' and the ensuing global focus on Muslims as a political problematic has meant that race and ethnic identification has become secondary. There is a new urgency to address issues that accompany the racialisation of Muslims. This implies a focus on more procedural issues that define Muslims as minorities in terms of what they represent rather than their social and cultural distinctness, which figure as more substantive issues in debates about 'Britishness' and belonging, for example. The focus on a particular issue or interest instrumentalises their presence, reducing it to categorisations that they seek in fact to escape. Their public presence through dawah pushes these to their limits to

recognise new realities on the ground, the day to day rather than abstract debates about Muslim belonging. They seek to be recognised through a different vernacular, therefore. Toward this end, a different set of ethics are pursued through dialogue, interaction and debate that help introduce new and alternative registers to ultimately expand the terms of debate to include problems of everyday life. Thus, they offer a different translation of themselves as Muslims; one which intersects with representations and sentiments majority society may hold about them, but with the hope of unsettling these.

Their investment in liberal democracy, then, is different. Their relationship to liberalism is not one of integration, which they attribute as the outcome of earlier generations' efforts, but agonism in response to 'illiberal secularism expressed in illiberal restrictions on religion in the public sphere' (Cavanaugh, 2007: 2). They recognise the limits of liberalism's promise for the protection or projection of their Muslimness; similar to the 'indifference to difference' that Fernando reports among new generations of Muslim activists in France (Fernando, 2014). Here then, in less predictable registers – but equally affective – corporeal strategies are employed, in which the liberal presumption of the public sphere as truly accessible and equitable and, therefore, habitable, is challenged through entry into it.

Street Salafis, then, are not so much a new or distinct presence but an afterlife expressed through their simultaneous living-in and wanting to escape the narrative and material tradition of Muslim life in the city. It is recognised as an afterlife, because it casts off some of what precedes it (through refutations and dismissals) while taking on new practices such as transgressions into broader public space. They inhabit Muslim Birmingham through oscillating between spaces of old 'community' (the ethnic enclave) and the new (city centre). In doing so, street Salafism as method helps to transform certain traditions, habits and practices of earlier generations of largely south Asian Muslims. The rewards of being here that were couched in economic terms for the 'here to stay' (Castles, 1984) generations are now folded into new considerations. Key among these are attempts to supplant the existing understanding of Islamic responsibility and practice which they complain is mired in culture, superstition and ritual. To them this represents a meek instance of Islam's existence in public – embodied in ornate mosques and religious figures as emblems of the accommodation of Muslims in Britain. In its place they are all for unsettling publics with the noise of the dawah stall and the sight of groups of Muslim brothers dressed in Arabic style thobes and trainers. In doing so, debate is promoted and a new site and conversation is beckoned.

## Conclusion

If, as scholars have suggested, a key aspect of Salafism is that of *manhaj*, which in turn is method, then, Salafism crudely put, is a way of living out the religion. This method I have described in its temporal and local sense of the street is made up of a range of urban maneuvers, which point to the unsettled nature of the signifier Salafi. Street Salafism is not merely suggestive of a site where Salafis meet and exist. It is, rather, a hermeneutic that builds upon infrastructure already on the street, while acting against the backdrop of authoritative Islam and the current regime of surveilling and policing Muslims as threat. Even though street Salafis depend on links with the dominant mosque that is a stalwart supporter of Saudi Salafism, they, nonetheless, do stuff that goes beyond the remit of institutionalised religion on this street.

The street – as racialised space, formed through interactions of the narrative, material and social – speaks not only of marginal geographies, but also discloses new ontological (conditions of) difference. Represented through rhythms of movement and presence that belie attempts to capture or represent them in the prevailing nomenclature of difference and

identity politics in the city. The transgressions, oscillations – between different thresholds of life as well as territories – and improvisations discussed, mean that we should consider street Salafism then, as prompting us to move beyond conceptions of the neighbourhood as a place of danger and constraint. The urban dynamics I have discussed – part of which are movements through racialised space and adoption of multicultural infrastructure – generate a range of feelings<sup>9</sup> including ambivalence toward the multicultural settlement that makes young people I worked with, simultaneously want to inhabit and escape the locality.

Street Salafism is a form of urban negotiation through which the city is lived. I have tried to describe facets of this in the form of embodied encounters given meaning through *dawah*, as a form of footwork that keeps street Salafis connected to the neighbourhood's Islamic infrastructure, while also enabling transgressions beyond this into more heterogenous parts of the city. These new urban maneuvers and visibilities – dramatic and agonistic as they are – are embodied instances through which new generations of Muslims are setting down a tradition of urban presence in the city, which also respond to local challenges, depictions and modalities of control in the narrative of extremism that encircles their lives. Rather than lobby, street Salafis seek to provoke with the ultimate ambition to invite toward different possibilities for multicultural life.

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### Notes

1. Steven Emerson: The Fox news expert who thinks Birmingham is 'totally Muslim', The Guardian, 12 January 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/media/shortcuts/2015/jan/12/steven-emerson-muslims-birmingham-error-fox-news> accessed 19 January 2020
2. 'It is very common to view jihadism as an extension of Salafism. Not all Salafis are jihadis, but all jihadis are supposedly Salafis, and so Salafism is the gateway to jihadism.' <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis> accessed 19 January 2020
3. Where *creed* is taken to be the purification of Muslim belief and practice and its protection from innovation.
4. This term is often employed in a pejorative way to mark its association with the 18th century founder of the movement Abdul Wahab and his strict denunciation of folk practices.
5. The "Arab street," and by extension, the "Muslim street," have become code words that immediately invoke a reified and essentially "abnormal" mindset, as well as a strange place filled with angry people who, whether because they hate us or just don't understand us, must shout imprecations against us.' (Bayat, 2013)

6. <https://www.theguardian.com/membership/2018/jun/21/radical-lessons-knife-crime-beyond-the-blade> accessed 15 May 2020
7. '... we find this expression to aptly convey the idea that individuals do not simply move from one mood or mental state to another. Rather, life as lived involves more subtle shifts, through which one may carry on, bearing "the marks of suffering endured" while finding the energy to engage in ordinary activities.' (Richoud and Amin, 2019: 4)
8. The 2011 census showed the city was 49% non-white.
9. '...in proposing subjectivity as always embedded within the environment, and in a constant co-constitutive relationship with it'. (Richoud and Amin, 2019: 7)

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### Biographical note

Ajmal Hussain is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Warwick.