

Bengali Muslims - the new East End radicals?

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Abstract

This article analyses the growth of a new revivalist, internationally orientated Islam in Tower Hamlets. It moves beyond discussions of identity to look at the role of ideology and socio-economic background, and to assess the effect of the new identities and ideologies on social and political action. It looks at why young Bengalis are being increasingly attracted to Islam, and at how this can benefit both themselves and the wider Bengali community; and it also explores where the impact of the new Islam is less positive, ending with an examination of the limits of its power as a vehicle for radical change in a deprived area of London. The article is based on interviews carried out in 2000 and 2001 as part of a wider historical study of political mobilisation of Jewish and Bengali immigrants in London's East End.

Key words:

Bangladeshi, Bengali, Islam, secularism, socialism, Tower Hamlets

Setting the Scene

When, in 1975, Bill Fishman published *East End Jewish Radicals* - a history of pre First World War socialist and anarchist movements in the Jewish East End - the Bengali¹ Muslim immigration from Bangladesh and formerly East Pakistan to those same streets, and often to similar sweated jobs in back-street garment workshops, was already well under way. It must then have seemed possible that the East End could witness a revival of radical socialism. A quarter of a century later, as the first generation of British-born and educated Bengalis takes its place in society, we do seem to be witnessing a new radicalism, but this radicalism is not socialist, it is Islamic.

Islamic movements are growing throughout the world, and the South Asian communities of Britain are no exception. Few in the East End would deny the increasing strength of a new Islam, and although it is impossible to give exact numbers of people involved, that is not the point. It has absorbed the energies of some of the most active young members of the community, allowing it to have an effect well beyond its simple numerical strength. The Jewish radicals were also always only a minority of their community, but, through their newspapers and clubs and dedicated organization, they affected the lives of thousands.

¹ Most British Bengalis are happy to describe themselves as either Bengali or Bangladeshi, though some will use Bangladeshi to emphasise their distinction from Hindu West Bengalis, in line with President Zia's Islamicising constitutional changes of 1977. I have used Bengali so as to be able to use the same term when talking about East Pakistanis, before Bangladeshi independence.

Only a small number of Bengalis of any age have abandoned their religion, but the form of worship practised by the first generations was mainly that of their families back home, and the maintenance of Bengali culture formed an important element of their practices. For the Islamic revivalists, many of these traditions are trimmings, which serve only to obscure the real importance of Islam and to divide its followers along ethnic lines. There is a strengthening belief in the importance of turning back to the fundamentals of religion below the cultural accretions, and a desire for a more positive identification with Islam. Veiled women have become a familiar sight on the area's streets, the Islamic Society at Tower Hamlets Further Education College claims a majority of students as members (Nazmul, interviewed Nov 2000)², and the East London Mosque has embarked on a massive building programme. Meanwhile an older generation, reared on the secular nationalism of the Bangladesh independence movement, is left to wonder at the way the tide has turned, and how to stop it. Abbas, who came to this country in 1975 aged around 15, observes: 'They're obviously providing a service that's missing in the community (...). So I think it's [more] to do with our failure than anything else that they've been able to attract [a] large number of young people' (Interviewed Nov 2000).

This is a study of the growth and effects in one particular community of what is often called Islamism; a religious movement that might be described as a constructive engagement of unquestioned Islamic fundamentals with the realities of the modern world to develop an all-embracing modern, religious, moral and political ideology. The main organisations following these lines in Britain have branched out from Jamaat-e-Islami, a political party and ideological movement founded by Maulana Abul A'la Maudoodi in India in 1941 and now working separately in each of the countries of the sub-continent. Thus they too are rooted in South Asia, though they have links with sympathetic movements across the world, and see themselves as part of the *Ummah*, the international Muslim community – an internationalism encouraged by globalisation and transnationalism (Sayyid 2000, p. 36). Their ultimate ideal is an Islamic state, but their strong core framework and outer flexibility allow them to adapt to different political and social situations. As Ron Geaves explains in his study of British Islam, 'The flexibility of these groups can be traced to Maulana Maudoodi's view that the gates of *ijtihad* [interpretation] cannot be closed' (Geaves 1996, p. 209). As the organisations become more established they may also be able to break free from the oft-noted dependence on Saudi-Arabian financial goodwill (Modood 1992, p. 271; Rex 1996, p. 217). (The Saudis donated over half the money for the new East London Mosque in Whitechapel Road, opened in 1985 (*East London Advertiser* 19/7/85).) In Britain Jamaat inspired Islamists concentrate on *dawah* – spreading the word of Islam – and on providing a living example of a righteous community, and they have developed a formidable network of organisations. Now the lingua-franca is English, but earlier language barriers necessitated the foundation of two specifically Bengali organisations: Dawat ul-Islam and the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO), which has a predominately, though not entirely, Bengali membership. The Jamaat-inspired UK Islamic Mission was originally founded in 1962 in the old East London Mosque, and the mosque council has had long links with Dawat ul-

² All names of people interviewed have been changed.

Islam and is now very much part of the Islamist tradition – though reports in the local papers of police being called to intervene in fights between rival factions demonstrate that control of the mosque has not always been undisputed (*East London Advertiser* 22/5/87 and 4/5/90 and *Docklands Recorder* 7/1/88).

Earlier studies of Islamism in Britain have emphasised that, ‘essentially the organisations attract the educated middle-classes’ (Geaves 1996, p. 223), which is why they were slow to get established (Lewis 1994, pp. 105 – 6). Tariq Modood, writing in 1990, commented that Jamaat had ‘negligible working class community links’ (p. 268), but he saw the potential for this to change as Muslim youth grew up and were educated in Britain (p. 271), and the situation in Tower Hamlets demonstrates that this has happened. My examples show that, while leadership of the movement is still associated with young educated professionals, it now has a strong foothold among British-educated working class Bengali youth, a hold that is enhanced by their recognition that these professionals share their own working class roots. As early as 1988, Francis Robinson predicted that support for Jamaat in Britain would be proportionately greater than in Pakistan because of its ability to address the ‘challenges of Western civilisation’ and its history of growth ‘amongst those who are in a state of transition from one type of society to another’. He also foresaw that its high level of organisation and ‘traditions of welfare provision’ would allow it to ‘work with some success towards creating a high level of Islamic organisation within the British state framework’ (p. 20).

The East End’s other main mosque, in Brick Lane, follows the religious tradition of the majority of British Muslims, the Barelwis, and is particularly patronised by the older generation. Its worshippers find their strength in preservation of the mystical Sufism that evolved in medieval India, and an important part of their devotions is mediated through *pirs* - Muslim saints and their descendants.

Although their vocal support for the Taliban following the terrorist destruction of the World Trade Centre shot the militant group Al-Muhajiroun into the media limelight, its membership is small. *Newsnight* reported on their Whitechapel meeting on 19th September in the aftermath of the attack, but the attendance could be counted in tens. Al-Muhajiroun broke away from the older militant organisation, Hizb ut-Tahrir³, ostensibly over the interpretation of certain aspects of *shariah* law, in 1996. Its name, literally ‘immigrants’, is the term used to describe those who went with Muhammad from Mecca to Medina, and its members compare themselves to the first Muslims, from whom they take their inspiration and method, trusting in God to help them today as they believe He did in the past. Their hope is to establish an Islamic state in one Muslim country, which will act as a catalyst for the spreading of the true faith, first to unite all Muslim countries under a new *khalifah* (Islamic empire), and then to save the whole world. They too believe that ‘there

³ Hizb ut-Tahrir defines itself on its website as ‘a political party whose ideology is Islam’. It was founded in Jerusalem in 1953 with the aim of reviving and purifying the Islamic *Ummah*, the community of believers, and restoring the *Khilafah*, the Islamic State, so that Islam will eventually ‘encapsulate the world’ (April 2001).

is no separation in Islam between religion and politics' (Al-Muhajiroun), but for them the fight for Islam is immediate and uncompromising. They reject the pragmatic politics of the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) - the umbrella group for the Jamaat organisations - and the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO), accusing both of un-Islamic practices and being the voice of the British government; and they have even described the MCB (who have assiduously lobbied the Labour party hierarchy) as a government creation (press release 22/9/01). In their turn, the YMO dismiss Al-Muhajiroun as an unrepresentative fringe organisation giving Islam a negative image. As one of their leading members puts it, 'they have a few individuals who have big mouths and they shout.' (Marouf, interviewed Sept 2001). During elections, members of Al-Muhajiroun put up posters declaring voting *haram* - forbidden to Muslims - a view not, of course, shared by Jamaat. Sovereignty, they argue, belongs only to God (Interview with Abdul, Jan 2002, see below). They see their religious duty as the saving of Muslims everywhere from the forces of *Kufr* (unbelievers), and people join the movement because they see the community of believers as under attack. One member explained this to me using the metaphor of an attack on the family (East London, Jan 2002). For a notorious few the fight against *Kufr* will be literal and they will leave to take part in what they always portray as the defensive battles in Afghanistan, Kashmir and Chechnya, but most will earn religious merit by donating funds for these causes. This is the only true financial investment and will pay dividends at the Day of Judgement. We were told at a Friday night meeting in East London that one pound can buy three bullets for Kashmir (Jan 2002). Few members are older than their twenties, and Al-Muhajiroun's main recruiting ground is the universities, though, as we were informed before the East London meeting, Bin Laden did more for their recruitment in a few months than they had achieved in years of work on the campuses.⁴

For over twenty years, the leading figure in the study of British Bengalis has been John Eade, whose writings reflect changing concerns in academia and in the community itself. The growing importance of Islamism - which Eade observed in Tower Hamlets from the late eighties (Eade 1990, p. 500) - and the widening Islamist/secularist divide are discussed increasingly in Eade's work, especially his recent articles on the 'Islamization of space' (Eade 1994; 1996; Eade, Fremeux and Garbin 2001).

This paper develops these themes through a materialist and political analysis, making detailed use of empirical examples that are based largely on interviews I have carried out in the last two to three years. It first examines why young Bengalis are attracted to Islamist movements. It explores the socio-economic background and the community's relationship to the alternative radicalism of socialist politics, and it looks in some detail at the practical and political organisation of the East London Mosque and its interaction with the community. This leads on to a discussion of the neglected question of the effects of

⁴ This summary has been put together from the Al-Muhajiroun website, downloaded February 2001, and notes taken at the East London meeting. This was a regular Friday night meeting attended by just over 50 young people - predominantly Pakistani. Although many members may have been students, their background was working class and the meeting included a few manual workers, evident from their work clothes. There were only seven women.

this type of radicalisation – on the individuals concerned, on the wider community and on the development of radical politics.

The Call of Islam

I will begin with Abdul (Interviewed Feb 2001), an articulate young man in his twenties who works locally in a government office. We had arranged to meet in the university where he attends evening classes in Arabic, and, to avoid offending religious law by being alone with a woman from outside the immediate family, he brought with him a friend who sat silent throughout our discussion. Thus chaperoned, I asked him to tell me about his personal Islamic journey. Abdul's parents had brought with them from Bangladesh a traditional approach to Islam, and he was raised to be a Bengali Muslim integrated into British society. His sense of not belonging, as a result of being between communities, is a feeling commonly described in anthropologies of diaspora. Like so many of his peers, he sought a role in street culture and became infatuated by gangster movies. When a lecturer at Tower Hamlets College introduced him to revolutionary socialism he felt, in his own metaphor, like a drowning man to whom a hand had been held out. He identified from personal experience with the arguments about working class oppression and began to take part in campaigning for bigger student grants and distributing Socialist Workers' Party leaflets. But he could not reconcile his belief in God with the theories of dialectical materialism, and when a college friend took him to debates organized by Hizb ut-Tahrir, new horizons opened up for him. For the first time he encountered Islam as a way of life, a complete ideological and practical system. His quest for the true path took him travelling around the world, and especially the Middle East, abandoning the degree he had started at university, and he even tried to 'correct' his parents' religious practices. Now he follows the teachings of Al-Muhajiroun, and, for Abdul, this rigorous political Islam filled both an emotional and an intellectual need. For him the physical defence of the Islamic state is a religious duty, and *jihad* is always portrayed as defence of Islam against an aggressor - *mujahedin* as freedom fighters. But for him the most important battles are in the arena of intellectual argument.

Abdul's story is not typical. Despite persistent effort, socialist groups have won few supporters, even of limited duration, among the East End Bengalis, and only small numbers of the area's new revivalist Muslims are followers of Al-Muhajiroun or Hizb ut-Tahrir; but this, perhaps extreme, example helps to bring into focus the different influences through which today's young Bengalis must steer a path.

Although most of those born or brought up here maintain a strong attachment to their parents' native land, often referring to it as 'home', their daily lives and probable futures are spent in the grey brick and concrete of Tower Hamlets, where the culture of Bengal can seem increasingly irrelevant. Their parents' Islam, rooted in and propagated by tradition, has little appeal when tradition itself is challenged; and the battles for secularism, which were at the heart of the Bangladesh independence movement in 1971, seem to them to belong to another age.

The alienation of young Bengalis (as of their less populous non-Bengali neighbours) is only too evident in its brutal symptoms of drug addiction, drug-related crime and gang violence. Male gangs can claim an established history, and for many boys the street is their main recreation space, but recently girl gangs have also made an appearance (Amina, a college student, interviewed July 2000). Youth workers report that more girls are also experimenting with drugs and even getting pulled into prostitution to support their habit (Rasul and Shiraz, interviewed July 2000; a youth counsellor, interviewed Oct 2001). Tower Hamlets offers few prospects for finding well-paid and satisfying work or decent accommodation. More than one in five men under 25 in the predominantly Bengali Spitalfields Ward are unemployed - as in St Dunstan's Ward, site of the vast Ocean Estate mentioned below - and although the average unemployment rate in the borough for young men and men overall is 15 per cent, there is little to look forward to, with the rate for men between 35 and 44 in Spitalfields rising to 37 per cent⁵. This is an area of endemic housing crisis (Glynn 2001b), and a history of uneven housing allocation, along with exceptionally large families, has meant that the Bengalis have always been among the worst sufferers. In the late seventies and early eighties, individual and community frustrations were channelled into the fight against racism (Leech 1994). Despite a resurgence of violence in the mid nineties, and the murder in Bow in the spring of 2001, in the heart of Tower Hamlets that fight has largely been won for the present - at least at street level. Hidden racism and institutional racism remain deep-rooted, but representatives of the Bengali community have taken their place on the local council, and significant improvements have been made in both housing and education. However, for most young Bengalis the future looks drear, with little hope of being able to do anything about it. Their parents believed they were struggling for a better future; many of the youth do not have that faith. And it doesn't help that their parents' cultural background widens the generation gap. It doesn't help that the proximity of the City exposes them continually to visions of unattainable wealth. Gang membership brings with it a sense of power as well as belonging, and, as youth workers in a drugs project observe, fights and drugs bring an excitement, which can only be bettered by using more violent weapons or stronger drugs (Rasul and Shiraz, interviewed July 2000). Masood, who runs a self-help group for addicts on the Ocean Estate in Stepney, explains that for some young men, drug dealing simply appears as the most attractive career option (Interviewed Feb 2001). When addiction leads to crime, loyalties break down and the addicts are left more alienated than ever.

The growing polarity between the drug culture and Islam is often remarked on. Islamic brotherhood is a potent antidote to alienation, and the fight against real and perceived Islamophobia can unite the community in a common purpose in the same way that the fight against racism did previously. Islam is something to be proud of, with a great history and international presence as well as religious promises of future glory, which can

⁵ Figures for December 2001 supplied by Tower Hamlets Borough Council: source GLA and ONS claimant count. Tower Hamlets has the worst unemployment rate in London, followed by Hackney with male unemployment at 12 per cent. Male unemployment in inner London averages 9 per cent, and in Great Britain over all it is 4 1/2 per cent. I have given male unemployment figures because these are the most significant for what is still, to a large extent, a traditional Muslim society.

all transport its followers out of the grey confines of the inner city. Modood went so far as to write that 'authentic "anti-racism" for Muslims (...) will inevitably have a religious dimension' (Modood 1992, p. 272), but that is both to deny the Muslims the power of choice (why inevitably?) and to question either the historical existence or the authenticity of the secular anti-racist movements of the late seventies.

Following September 11th 2001 there was a predictable upturn of interest in the meaning of Islam among non-religious Muslim youth. Already by September 20th Marouf, at the YMO, was able to tell me that, 'those who are not practising (...) have realised that they ought to practise, and they need to at least show their identity as a Muslim (...) A lot of people have come to us to find out about this situation in the light of Islam.' (Interviewed Sept 2001) Through formal meetings in the mosques and youth clubs and informal contacts on the street, the YMO put forward their interpretation of events. In November, Marouf reported that, 'As far as the Muslims who are not practising, yes, when we go and approach them there is (...) more interest in listening to us, rather than saying, "Oh, these are the practising brothers again, they're going to say the same thing." (...) They're listening and they're saying, "How can we help?"' (Interviewed Nov 2001) If, in the excitement, their listeners proposed going out to fight, then the YMO would tell them, "'that's not our duty and responsibility here. Our responsibility is to pray for them, to speak out against any injustice, be it in Afghanistan or in America, and that's what we should do.'" (Marouf, interviewed Nov 2001) In its 2001 Ramadan message the YMO advised members to 'be pro-active and speak out gently but confidently for peace and justice in the world' (YMO, 25/11/01). Public statements and government lobbying are orchestrated through the Muslim Council of Britain, and Marouf is careful not to pre-empt the decisions of the Islamic leaders. The Council is anxious to draw a line between themselves and some 'vocal groups', through which the Muslim community is 'threatened from within' (MCB press release 7/10/01). The reaction of the British Jamaat-inspired groups to both the terrorism in New York and the war in Afghanistan was firm but measured – in fact very much in line with the wider anti-war movement, but with greater emphasis on the lack of incontrovertible legal proof of Bin-Laden's guilt. They regarded Afghanistan under the Taliban as a sort of failed Islamic state in the same way that Trotskyists have both criticised and defended the Soviet Union as a failed workers' state. Articles in *Insight*, the bi-monthly magazine produced by the East End based Jamaat inspired group, Islamic Forum Europe, analysed the realpolitik of gas pipelines and containment of rival powers, as well as looking at the stresses on the community from the point of view of a clinical psychologist (*Insight* Nov/Dec 2001). There were none of the hints at a possible Jewish conspiracy found in the speeches of Jamaat's Ameer in Pakistan (Jamaat-e-Islami (Pakistan)). Members of the East London Mosque have attended mainstream peace meetings; however this is unlikely to draw them any closer to the secular Muslims, who share their concerns, but express them in different language.

Islamic mobilisation in Britain first became big news with the campaign against Rushdie's Satanic Verses in 1989. The protests in the Bengali East End were far from the vehemence of those in Bradford, which Yunas Samad has attributed to Bradford's history

of Muslim embattlement and mobilisation (Samad 1992, pp. 512-18; Samad 1996, pp. 94-96). However there were public meetings in both the East End's main mosques and two large marches to Hyde Park. Islamic mobilisation may breed more Islamophobia encouraging more mobilisation on religious lines. Although the Jamaat-inspired Islamic Foundation first drew British Muslims' attention to Rushdie's book, the subsequent role of Jamaat-linked groups was small. It has been suggested that this was a by-product of the Iranian-Saudi struggle for Muslim hegemony, in which groups connected to the Saudis did not want to give too much support to a campaign hijacked by the Iranian *fatwa* (Samad 1992, pp. 510-11; Rex 1996, p. 235). However, the Satanic Verses raised the profile of Islam generally.

The turn to religion as a way out of social deprivation is as old as class society, but why is it of growing importance now? In his analysis of 'the Rushdie Affair' in Bradford, Modood concluded that, 'the demonstrations and book-burnings were above all working-class anger and hurt pride' (Modood 1992, p. 261), but his explanation for this anger taking a religious outlet is unconvincing. He traced the cause to the vacuum created by the 'desertion of the secular intelligentsia', which 'does not understand and/or feel responsible for its own ethnic working class' (pp. 270-71). There is certainly a vacuum and lack of secular leadership, but that vacuum is not due to the absence of a middle class who would hardly be expected to breach the gap of class experience. Nira Yuval-Davis identified the cause of that vacuum when she wrote 'In the Third World, and among Third World minorities in the West, the rise of fundamentalism is intimately linked with the failure of nationalist and socialist movements to bring successful liberation from oppression, exploitation and poverty' (Yuval-Davis 1992, p. 280). Leaving aside the question of whether these movements failed in their allotted task or failed to get properly established in the first place, we are faced today with a socialist movement that is commonly perceived to have failed, or at least to be weaker than at any time since the Russian revolution. When socialism is not thought to be able to offer a way out, working-class anger will turn to other movements.

Although Abdul did initially try to seek direction through radical socialism, the Socialist Workers' Party could not succeed in persuading him to stay within the movement, as they and other left groups have not succeeded in the past in gaining a foothold within the British Bengali community. It is not that the Bengalis are without a strong radical left tradition, and socialist ideas have often found resonances in Islam, as they have in Christianity. Parts of that tradition had roots in the nineteenth-century Islamic Faraizi movement (Zirling 1992, p. 9); the early twentieth-century pan-Islamic and anti-British Khilafat movement proved fertile ground for the development of socialist and Bolshevik ideas (Ansari 1990); and, more recently, the East Bengali left found a powerful leader in Maulana Bhashani, who was originally an Islamic teacher, and spent a year in exile in London in the mid-fifties. The immigrants, who came predominantly from Sylhet in the rural north-east, would have had little previous exposure to working class politics, but, through people such as Bhashani, echoes of more radical, and especially Maoist, ideas had diffused through the villages. However, within Bangladesh the left has been

continually outmanoeuvred by liberal reformists and at times brutally suppressed (Lifschultz 1979); and in London, the more radical strands of Bengali socialism became subsumed first in the struggle for Bangladeshi independence and then in the pragmatic politics of community advancement via the local Labour Party or in more immediately practical social work, muddled in some cases with personal ambition (Glynn 2001a). I found disillusionment with local politics common to several interviewees. Latif, from Tower Hamlets College, explains:

I know so many councillors around here (. . .) and I really don't think they do it for the people. They just want to show people that they're Bangladeshi and they're a councillor and they can do it. That's all it is - for popularity, I reckon. (Interviewed July 2000)

After such a history of socialist failure and compromise, it is not difficult for young Bengali Muslims to be persuaded that socialist political idealism is, at the least, irrelevant.

The Islamists argue that the separation of religion and politics is not possible because Islam encompasses every aspect of life. Zoinul, who has recently come from Bangladesh, where he was an executive member of Jamaat-e-Islami, explains that Islam rejects both socialism and capitalism. Instead the answer lies in the Islamic economic system. (Interviewed Feb 2001)

Maudoodi's exposition of this system describes capitalism with an Islamic face. 'What one has earned or inherited is beyond doubt his own property', he wrote, '[And Islam] suggests that if you are wealthy, you should have better dress and good accommodation and a decent living' but 'it is cruel and unjust that money which can be used to feed teeming, starving humanity should be frittered away in useless ostentation.' (Maudoodi 1981, p. 111) Although he enumerates the evils of even reformed capitalism, its underpinnings 'are the true principles of human economy, provided they are shorn of exaggerations incorporated with them by the bourgeoisie of the West because of their selfishness and extremist nature.' (Maudoodi 1995, p. 74) Islam 'attaches real importance to the individual', each 'singly and in his personal capacity' answerable to God (p. 70); and economic freedom is as necessary as freedom of thought and action (p. 71). Socialism, for which Communist Russia is taken as the example, is rejected for its lack of freedom, its tyranny and violence and its lack of moral order.

His Islamic solution relies on a mixture of the Social Insurance Scheme provided by the *zakat* or religious tax (one of the five pillars of Islam); government control in areas such as a minimum wage, maximum working hours and arbitration; and the banning of interest and also other business practices such as hoarding, speculation and monopolies. However the role of government would be restricted to 'guidance and co-ordination' (Maudoodi 1995, p. 78), and there is emphasis on 'mutual agreement' between employers and employees (p. 77).

Maudoodi wrote his criticism of Socialism in response to Soviet Communism and its influences in the post-Independence Sub-Continent, but in post Welfare-State Britain,

Hannan, one of the volunteer activists at the East London Mosque, is encouraged by Islam's systematized approach to charity to see socialism as 'just one aspect of Islam' (Interviewed Jan 2001).

Islamic charity and social work can readily be seen in action in Tower Hamlets. While Al-Muhajiroun may appeal to the revolutionary fervour of some university students (such as Abdul), the East London Mosque builds its strength on the basis of solid community work. This is in contrast to the Brick Lane Mosque, which refers social welfare problems to the secular Bangladesh Welfare Association next door. Young Muslims are attracted to the East London Mosque through the Young Muslim Organisation (YMO) or its female counterpart, Muslim Aat; through Women's Relief; through *dawah* - the propagation of the Islamic message - and through the example of those who have found, in Islam, the motivation to take control of their lives and improve their position in society. (The East London Mosque would certainly discourage its young brothers and sisters from dropping out of university). Islamic discussions are well publicized and can even attract street-wise kids with little else to do. Thus Nurul at the Crowder Youth Club, who describes himself as not particularly religious, goes to 'talks and things like that' because 'just, it's interesting, innit, to hear about and find out more' (Interviewed July 2000). Gulam, a youth worker in Spitalfields, describes the mosque as like a second youth centre (Interviewed August 2000). There has even been a Muslim local radio programme in the afternoons including a children's phone-in.

For Nazmul (who compered the phone-in) discovery of the Young Muslim Organisation when he was at Tower Hamlets College changed his life. He had been involved with gangs and crime and more than once got kicked out of school. He emerged from college with high A-level grades and is now reading law at university. He explains how this transformation came about:

I don't think they spoke to me directly about education, they talked to me about Islam. What is Islam? Islam is a way of life (. . .). After that I suppose I had role models, I saw in YMO (. . .) which I [had] never met before, people who were lawyers (. . .) teacher[s] and so on. [These] role models give you a motivation; you want to be like them (. . .). We can look up to them, because we know that they were once taking drugs and in gangs and doing other things (. . .). One of the fundamentals of Islam is to bring about change, change for the benefit of everyone (. . .); the best way to make a change in the community is to do something and be something. (Interviewed Nov 2000)

Clearly, for Nazmul personally the role of Islam in the form of the YMO has been immensely beneficial. In his words, 'it gave me a life-line'. Rasul, who works for a drugs project, uses the appeal of Islamic brotherhood for youth outreach work:

A lot of things have been achieved (. . .) through the path (. . .) of religion, basically. 'Cos the majority of us who are Bangladeshis (. . .) - our roots are (. . .) Islam, at the end of the day (...). This is the only thing that binds our community together (. . .). I mean, I feel confident where, like, if I was on the

street, rather than preach that I'm Bengali (. . .), if I preach Islam to them, they would more adhere to me (. . .). They would try to listen. (Interviewed July 2000)

In a close community in which older boys are already respected as 'brothers' (Interview with youth workers, June 1999; Alexander 2000, p. 142), Islamic brotherhood may be accepted as an extension of existing ties. Less romantically, *Insight* has argued that 'a deep sense of fear and belief in the hereafter' is the best deterrence to criminality (Sept/Oct 2001, editorial). Shiraz, a student who helps Rasul, believes that 'Islam is not a religion but it's a guideline for us to follow. Everything and everyone should have a guideline so they know where they're going wrong and right' (Interviewed July 2000).

Unlike traditional Bengali mosques, the East London Mosque has a women's prayer room and women's talks and discussions, and at a recent conference in Bethnal Green's York Hall, organized by the YMO, Muslim Aat and Islamic Forum Europe and attended by some thousand young Muslims, the women's section was noticeably fuller than the men's.⁶ Although their black *burqas* and *hijabs* may look intimidating - to Bengali women as well as to Western ones - girls who follow the Islamic revivalist path stress the freedom that their religion gives them. They compare their position to that of their mothers, who are restrained by a Bengali tradition that gave little importance to women's education and severely restricted their movements outside the home. In fact they may use their new-found Islamic knowledge to demonstrate to their parents that such restrictions have no basis in religious law. While they would not dispute that 'the husband has been given the position of head of the family' (Maudoodi 1981, p. 109), they explain that men and women are equal in importance but have different roles, and that the idea of a woman having no say over whom she marries is anathema to Islam.

Women's Relief, the advice centre at the East London Mosque, is not afraid to tackle sensitive issues such as domestic violence and female genital mutilation⁷, as well as helping in general areas such as training and job search. The young woman who runs the centre juggles her job with teacher training and looking after her small child (interviewed Jan 2001). The new Islam wants to see its children's mothers well educated, religiously and otherwise, and recognizes that women may want or need to work - child-care is not so much of a problem when most Bengali grandmothers are at home close by. In this they have updated Maudoodi's view that 'Women have been ordered to remain in their houses and discharge the responsibilities assigned to them', only going out 'when necessary' (Maudoodi 1981, p. 109).

Nilufa, a community worker, is not part of the Jamaat movement - she prays at home rather than at a mosque because she holds the traditional belief that that earns a woman more reward in heaven, and she wears a traditional Bengali shawl rather than a *hijab* - but her approach to her religion is in many ways typically modern:

⁶ Regional Convention 2001 on 'Muslim priorities in the West', Saturday 11th August 2001.

⁷ This is not practiced in Bangladesh but is common among Somalis.

A lot of people say, we don't believe that our children should go on to education and stuff like that. As soon as they're sixteen they should be at home, whatever, specially the girls (. . .) and then married off. But in our religion this is for illiterate people. Our religion says, right, knowledge is the biggest thing that you could ever have, so it doesn't matter how much education a woman takes in, the better it is for her (. . .). The best professions for women in Islam is teaching because you're actually sharing the knowledge that you've got. And that's the most beneficial one. That's where you'll get the most reward [in heaven] (. . .)

In this society and this day, right, [men and women] have to work together... [But] as long as your mind is clean and clear whilst you're actually doing the job, you can do whatever you want; and as long as you're dressed appropriately as well. (Interviewed July 2000)

The high level of organisation of the Jamaat-based groups has already been remarked on. The method of organization and training adopted by Jamaat is referred to by them as a 'cadre system' (Masood, interviewed Feb 2001; Jamaat-e-Islami (Pakistan), Feb 2001) and suggests an unacknowledged debt to the organizational methods developed by the Communists. Nazmul describes how the YMO turns school children into young activists:

They learn skills, how to organize a circle. I mean sounds simple, but for young people it's quite a bit - the chair, the secretary, how to arrange a meeting, how to arrange a public meeting, how to demand something to the college through the students' union (. . .). Once they go to college they can use that skill as a tool to live at college. (Interviewed Nov 2000)

The new Islam appears to be helping both individuals and the wider community to lead more focused and fulfilling lives; so why are secular community leaders so worried, and should others who are concerned about the community, and about the implications of such changes on society more generally, be worried too?

Islam and the Community

It is tempting to dismiss the secularists' concerns as the transfer of Bangladeshi politics to London soil. Was the temporary coup in which the YMO persuaded the community's oldest organization, the Bangladesh Welfare Association, to add the preamble *Bismillah-ar-Rahman-ar-Rahim* (in the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful) to its constitution in 1981 (Siddiqi 1988, p. 12), a forerunner of major changes in the London community, or just a distant echo of President Ziaur Rahman's revisions to the Bangladesh constitution four years earlier? How do increasing secular/religious tensions in Bangladesh affect the situation in London?

When the Jamaat-e-Islami MP and charismatic Islamic preacher, Maulana Sayedee, comes from Bangladesh to speak at British Mosques there are demonstrations. The UK branch of the Nirmul Committee, which campaigns for the prosecution of war criminals from 1971, has published detailed allegations of his involvement in a reign of terror that

included the murder of intellectuals, supplying young women to the Pakistani army and looting Hindu homes⁸ (Nirmul Committee 1999). And they have publicized the Channel 4 Dispatches programme of 3rd May 1995 that, in the words of the Channel 4 press release, 'reveals exclusive evidence of how three prominent British Muslims are guilty of inciting torture, mutilation and murder' (3 May 1995). One of the three is vice-chairman of the East London Mosque. (Now Nirmul Committee members themselves complain of harassment as a result of their campaigning.) The newly elected Ameer (leader) of Jamaat in Bangladesh has also been accused of killing and torture in '71 when he was leader of the Pakistan Islamic Student Society, so that the party's website is forced to contain a denial of the charge (Feb 2001). Stephen Barton, who studied the Bengalis in Bradford in the early eighties, when Dawat ul-Islam supported the splitting off of a new separate Islamic centre, commented on Jamaat's support for Pakistan in the 1971 war and concluded 'Membership of the Dawat al-Islam is liable to remain small, at least in Bradford, until these memories fade.' (Barton 1986, p. 71)

In fact the Jamaat groups seem to have managed to separate themselves from historic ties more easily than their political rivals. In keeping with internationalist ideals, Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh, unlike the other main Bangladeshi parties, does not have a London branch, but the refusal of its international sympathizers to limit their attention to Bangladesh (or Pakistan) only strengthens the appeal of its ideology in London. By contrast, the emphasis that the London secularists often give to the legacy of the independence movement does not help their cause, especially among the post 1971 generation who find Bangladeshi politics so corrupt that Hasan and his friends in the A-level politics class in Tower Hamlets College regard it as merely a joke, not to be taken seriously (Interviewed July 2000).

For many London born Muslims the politics of Bangladesh are not relevant. Marouf explains, 'with all due respect to Sayedee,' that

the Young Muslim Organisation UK never invited Sayedee to Britain in the recent past, and we don't plan to invite him because he doesn't speak English; and he's dealing with the senior, older generation of the Muslim community, and we're concentrating with the British Muslim youth here in Britain, and they have different agenda, they have different interests, they have different way of thinking. (Interviewed Nov 2001)

Nazmul (also of the YMO) notes, 'We do identify ourselves as part of the global Islamic movement (. . .)[but] I don't have any links with Jamaat, because I don't know anyone in Jamaat.' (Interviewed Nov 2000) He sees the protests against Sayedee as due to a combination of Bangladeshi politics and the vested interests of those Sayedee criticizes, such as people who make money from selling alcohol, or who follow the traditional Bengali *pirs*, or saints, of which his revivalist Islam does not approve. (There is a grain of

⁸ Sayedee has publicly challenged his accusers in Bangladesh to produce proof of his activities, but the deliberate destruction of evidence by previous authorities, as well as the climate of political violence, minimizes the chances of successful prosecution.

truth in this as the protesters also emphasise Sayedee's insults to the community – which he portrays as uneducated and immoral (Nirmul Committee 1999); criticism especially unacceptable in coming from a non-Sylheti.) Bangladeshi politics are not relevant to Nazmul in London, but in his explanation of vested interests he categorizes the protesters as un-Muslim. He is similarly dismissive when asked about Bengali Language Day, which commemorates a defining moment of Bengali struggle against West Pakistani dominance. Commenting on the organisers of the celebrations he states, 'most of them are atheist, who don't like Islam'. Most Bengalis who describe themselves as secular are religious people who believe it is possible to separate religion and politics (Abbas, interviewed Nov 2000) - the Nirmul committee leaflet actually quotes Prophet Muhammad – but, when questioned, Nazmul only qualified the comment with, 'If they're not atheists some of them are at least minimum; they're atheist supporters, or people who are not supportive of us.'

For those within the Islamist movement Islam is a force that brings people together, but at the same time, as Nazmul's comment demonstrates, it can be a source of bitter division between them and those outside it. Few can feel these divisions more strongly than the young British Bengalis trying to find their way among the different forces acting on their lives. Revisionist Islam may divide its adherents from their traditional parents – the Sayedee demonstrations saw parents and children facing each other across the barriers - and it puts those who do not conform to its moral code under strong pressure to join the group, or risk being categorized among the drug takers and tarts. For some students at Tower Hamlets College, the old parental fear about 'what will the community say?' has been supplemented by the new moral policing of the College Islamic Society. Amina is a serious bookish student and a believing Muslim, who likes to wear a denim jacket over her modest but modern dress and trousers, although she has been told that the way she dresses makes people wrongly assume that she is 'the type' who goes out with boys (Interviewed July 2000). She explains that 'the moment the Islamic Society are around... everybody's quietened down, and they're just aware that they're there, so you've got to behave well'. If they see an Islamic Society boy the girls will 'run a mile' to avoid charges of 'free-mixing'. Amina has used the Islamic revivalist pro-education arguments with her parents when they have questioned her decision to go to university, but her failure always to keep to a strict Islamic code in her busy life of friends, work and study is a source of real fear for her:

I get scared when people ask me about my religion because I think I am really neglecting Islam (. . .). If I'm giving myself excuses (. . .) that's a sin (. . .). That's saying you're a (. . .) non-believer, and to say that, that I'm a non-believer, I think is the most harsh thing you can do to yourself.

As has been noted in other contexts (Yuval-Davis 1992, p.289; Dwyer 1999, pp. 63 and 65), a girls' 'empowerment' by religion has its price.

Some respond to such pressures by adopting a hypocritical double life. Others may simply feel ostracized by a society that would classify them as sinners, and be left with little positive guidance with which to replace the traditional morals of their parents. The

Islamic movements profess their universality, but those who refuse to be enlightened according to their ideology will not be helped by them.

However, Islamic revivalism doesn't just affect people at an individual level. At the same time as encouraging its adherents to play an active part in civil society, and criticising isolationism (Anas Takriti, York Hall convention), it can provide the means, especially in the growing number of Muslim schools, for them to live in an increasingly separate sphere. The growth of Islamic social organizations has made it easy for people to spend most of their time within a separate Islamic world, even when playing sport with their Muslim brothers or sisters, or listening to folk music with Islamic words on Muslim radio. The possible consequences of this type of separation on racial and religious tensions have, of course, been the subject of much recent debate.

And apart from providing fertile soil for the seeds of future tensions, the new Islam may hold back progress in reaching the radical solutions urgently needed to tackle the fundamental social and economic problems of areas such as Tower Hamlets. Those who do not believe that these solutions can be found in Islamic Law and Islamic ethics and charity, should indeed be concerned by the growth of Islamist movements, because these movements are deliberately drawing a generation away from seeking any other form of radical change. As Jamaat-e-Islami (Pakistan) put it in their website:

[Jamaat's] greatest contribution lies in saving millions of Muslim Youth (...). It has offered before them Islam as an alternative to the contemporary ideologies of secularism, liberalism, nationalism, capitalism, socialism and the like. (Feb 2001)

Politically, the East London Mosque is more likely to bring young Muslims into contact with Prince Charles - who has joined its members for Iftr, the breaking of the Ramadan fast - than with any significant practical movement for progressive change, as a secularist would understand it.

Though they may not follow the detailed politics of Jamaat in Pakistan and Bangladesh, most young revivalist Muslims share its ideology and believe that the ultimate ideal would be to live in a world governed by Islamic Law, and that 'so far, as the teachings of the Quran and the Sunnah are concerned, they are eternally binding' (Jamaat-e-Islami (Pakistan), Feb 2001). Sabina, who helps at the mosque, justifies the severity of parts of *Shariah* law with the observation that 'maybe if there was more stronger punishments, people wouldn't commit those crimes in the first place' (Interviewed Jan 2001). Jamaat stresses that the ideal of a Muslim state is to be achieved through democratic evolution and not bloody revolution, but the complete Islamic society is the ideal to which the revivalist Muslims' community and educational work is ultimately aimed. Their idealism, their sincerity and their organizational skills are admirable and enviable. The contributions that they have made to social work and youth work are very real. But those who do not share their ultimate aim of an Islamic society should indeed be concerned at this Islamic revival.

Whether the relative social conservatism of the Jamaat groups will in itself begin to discourage the recruitment of radical youth remains to be seen. If that does happen the beneficiary need not be the socialist left, but could be the even more socially conservative but politically revolutionary Islamists. In his condemnation of hoarding money, his denouncement of interest as the 'ball and chain of economic enslavement' and his repeated references to Muslim oppression, the speaker at Al-Muhajiroun's East London meeting appealed to a radical instinct for a fairer society. Nazmul acknowledges that organisations that (as he puts it) 'believe in revolutionary change', such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and Al-Muhajiroun, can be more attractive to rebellious students than the YMO, which believes in 'evolutionary change' (and in which he is a leading member). Indeed, he compares the appeal of the 'revolutionaries' to that of socialist revolt against the government, but he assures himself that such student allegiances are only temporary (Interviewed Dec 2000). So far these more revolutionary groups have neither developed the rigorous organisation practiced by Jamaat, nor turned their attention to the kind of grass roots issues through which they could retain their membership and recruit from a broader constituency, and their reach is very limited.

At the same time, those who would describe themselves as secular socialists are not only being elbowed out of sections of grass roots politics, but have lost the radicalism to inspire. As Abbas, who I quoted at the beginning of this paper, explains, a major part of the Nirmul Committee's work in this country is the propagation of an alternative Bengali secular culture in which the British born generation can be proud, and which can serve as a source of both personal and community strength (Interviewed Nov 2000, see Glynn 2001a). However, cultural programmes can hardly compete with the pull of Islam, which has behind it the power of an over-riding ideology.

When the East End Jewish radicals first tried to appeal to their less politically active brothers, the Jewish establishment found that their most powerful weapon of defence against the dangerous new socialist ideologies was the encouragement of religious passion. The Hebrew Socialist Union, formed in Spitalfields in 1876, came to a quick end when rumours were started that the socialists were really Christian missionaries, and the union's second meeting ended in an all round battle which had to be broken up by the police (Fishman 1975, pp. 103-19). Later, the charismatic preacher known as the Kamenitzer Maggid was admired and encouraged as a counter to the radical left by both the Jewish aristocracy and the religious communities of the East End (Fishman 1975, p. 213; Jung September 1967, pp. 20-21). But the Jewish radicals were driven by a powerful socialist ideology, which, although it was never accepted by the majority of members of their community, enabled them to make a substantial social and political impact. This time, at the beginning of the 21st century, the power of ideology seems to be only with the men of God. And in many ways the Muslim revivalists are indeed radical, but they are radical on their own terms.

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