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38. Muslim Travellers: Homing Desire, the *Ummah* and British-Pakistanis

Seán McLoughlin

The 15 million people of Muslim descent now settled in Western Europe represent the most significant movement of labour into the continent since the Second World War (Cesari and McLoughlin 2005). This essay explores the salience of an Islamic ‘homing desire’ for contemporary Muslim diasporas. It focuses on the idea of belonging to the *ummah*, a synchronic and diachronic community of believers which claims membership of around one billion believers across over 50 nations world-wide. The *ummah* can be said to have a clear mytho-historical and territorial orientation in terms of Makkah, the birthplace of Islam and its Prophet, as well as remaining the focus of a return there during the greater and lesser pilgrimages, the *hajj* and ‘*umra*’ (McLoughlin 2009). However, the emphasis here is on more de-territorial and extra-territorial, trans-local and supra-local imaginings. I begin by exploring how and why universal religions might create a homeland consciousness analogous to that of a diaspora, continue by sketching what this has meant in terms of the history of Islam as a travelling faith, and conclude by examining the extent to which global crises involving Muslims and the Islamic world since the 1990s have revealed what Werbner (2002b) calls the predicament of diaspora amongst British-Pakistanis.

Diaspora consciousness, homing desires and religious identity

In a highly globalized society, time and space are compressed with such increasing intensity and extensity that the experience of simultaneity across distance is becoming possible in some aspects of transnational life. However, even amidst the flows of people, capital, goods,

information and ideas, social relations beyond the local remain imagined, indeed ever more intensely so. Because of advances in communications technology, diasporas no longer struggle as they once did to maintain contact with their homelands and co-ethnics dispersed world-wide. Nevertheless, absence, loss and the fallibility of memory continue to produce fictions of home and community which, while being ‘imaginatively true’ inevitably remain partial and fragmented representations (Rushdie 1991: 10). For this reason post-modern and post-colonial re-appropriations of diaspora theory have problematized a preoccupation with homeland origins. At the same time, such a preoccupation lends legitimacy to hostland formulations of belonging that construct racialized and ethnicized minorities as ‘in’ but not ‘of’ the nation. Instead, theorists like Hall, Gilroy and Bhabha valorize interstitial spaces between ‘here’ and ‘there’ as sites for imaginative counter-narratives which resist, reconfigure and translate home and hostland traditions anew, mapping new cartographies of identification which the conventional diasporic triad (cf. Sheffer 1986b; Safran 1991) cannot necessarily contain. This, then, is the context for scholars’ consideration of more deterritorialized and metaphorical imaginings of belonging beyond place and the nation-state, for example in terms of Brah’s emphasis on ‘a homing desire which is not the same thing as a desire for a ‘homeland’’ (1996: 179-80; cf. Clifford 1997).

In this regard, Cohen’s original typology (1997: x) speaks of cultural diasporas – more recently and usefully re-dubbed *deterritorialized* diasporas (Cohen 2008: 18). Some Caribbean peoples, for example, are said to ‘have lost their conventional territorial reference points ... [they] have become in effect mobile and multi-located’ (2008: 124). Other examples of such atypical diasporas include the religious diaspora of Muslims, the main focus of this essay. However, the question of whether a particular religious tradition or religions in general can properly, or usefully, be described in terms of the concept of diaspora

is disputed. Vertovec, for example, draws a distinction between ‘ethnic’ religions such as Judaism, Sikhism and Hinduism which seem to qualify, and ‘universal’ religions such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism about which he is more sceptical. Historically, the latter have been less obviously tied to particular peoples or places: ‘It broadens the term far too much to talk – as many scholars do – about the “Muslim diaspora”, “Catholic diaspora”...and so forth...[A]re Muslims in Pakistan part of a diaspora religion because Islam is derived from and broadly centred on Mecca?’ (2004b: 281). However, for all the slipperiness of religion as a category in this regard, Cohen does seem to acknowledge that such issues are worthy of further exploration:

[R]eligions can provide additional cement to bind a diasporic consciousness, but they do not constitute diasporas in and of themselves... The myth and idealization of a homeland and a return movement are also conspicuously absent...their programmes are extraterritorial rather than territorial...On the other hand, once we admit the category of a cultural diaspora, we are also opening out the possibility that spiritual affinity may generate a bond analogous to that of a diaspora. (1997: 189)

The suggestion here is that while in different time/space combinations religions indigenize and often reinforce territorial identifications, it is the ability to trump such processes with extraterritorial imaginings that is both especially salient and peculiarly well enabled in a globalizing world. Despite ‘composite origins’ (Stewart and Shaw 1994: 18), the power of religions resides in their mythic, symbolic and ritual resources to narrate the idealized fictions and abstracted unities which seek to emphasize stability over flux and secure continuity through time and across space. Portable sacred texts, competitive missionary aspirations and the activities of translocal orders, all point towards religion as the original globalizer

(Lehmann 2001). However, as Turner notes, in the past, 'world religious systems had little opportunity to realize themselves globally' (1994: 83). Thus some key transformations associated with modernity including advances in communications technology have facilitated universalizing discourses seeking to better assert themselves. Rather than assimilate or liberalize, even traditions characterized as essentially resistive of singular definitions such as 'Hindu-ism' have tended to emphasize 'universalizing' religious tendencies in a pluralizing world (cf. Smart 1987; McLoughlin 2010). Indeed, self-conscious of difference – provoked by interactions with others, both with the state, wider society and a broader range of co-religionists – diasporas are notable for producing increasingly rationalized and homogenizing accounts of their traditions.

While transnational flows relativize identifications everywhere, such processes are experienced especially intensely in diaspora. Jet-setting intellectuals and artistic elites often playfully celebrate a sense of homelessness in this regard but cultural difference and intermixture is experienced by many migrants in terms of crisis, alienation and doubt (Werbner 1997a: 12). Moreover, while multiple identities are a given, a politics that seriously challenges the inequalities and exclusions of the world's global cities has not emerged from the endless shifts of hybridity. We must all speak from somewhere and being heard requires an act of prioritisation and 're-presenting' oneself (Werbner 1997b: 228). For many migrants, then, it is in a selective return to aspects of cultural tradition that many have re-discovered the moral resources to restore certainties in the face of cultural translation and social exclusion (Hall 1991b: 52–3; Werbner 1997a: 21).

As homeland attachment, custom and language lose their valency when memories fracture, especially amongst those born in the diaspora, the argument here is that religious alternatives open up the possibility for a new, more mobile, 'homing desire' (Brah 1996: 179-80). Unlike assimilation, maintaining universal religious (as opposed to homeland cultural) boundaries, manages the problem of cultural identity without the risk of losing all sense of a 'chain of memory' (cf. Hervieu-Léger 2000). New 'routes' may be imaginatively continuous with 'roots'. Of course, recalling Anthony P. Cohen (1985), the symbolic construction of community rests upon shared symbols and not unchanging meanings. Therefore, in the context of hostland exclusion of racialized and ethnicized minorities, as well as the uneven power geometry of West-Rest relations, non-Christian religions are especially well-resourced to imagine moral and political orders beyond the secular nation state and, arguably, the universal claims of Western modernity itself.

Travelling Islam and the idea of the *ummah*

As Eickelman and Piscatori suggest, various forms of travel and associated 'journeys of the mind' (1990: xii) – including *hajj* and *ziyarah* (pilgrimage to the tombs of holy people), as well as *rihla* (travel in seeking knowledge) and *da'wah* (proselytism) – have all contributed to the Islamicate religious imagination past and present. Such mobility has 'inspire[d] changes in how Muslims conceive of and experience "Islam"' (1990: 3) as believers have negotiated their similarities and differences in encounters with Muslim 'others' at least as much as non-Muslim 'others'. Islam's own myth of origins enshrines the symbolic significance of religiously inspired journeying in the account of early Muslims' persecution as a minority in Makkah and emigration (*hijrah*) to the oasis of Yathrib (later known as Madinat al-Nabi, the City of the Prophet). Marking the very beginning of the Muslim (*hijri*)

calendar, 622 CE or 1AH, it imagines a symbolic move from Makkan *jahiliyya* (ignorance) to a new, self-governing, social and political order. The universalizing monotheism hitherto associated with the 'higher' civilisations of the Byzantines and Sassanids became the vehicle for a broader unity amongst politically fragmented and polytheistic tribes. Indeed, having received God's final message from the seal of all his Prophets, Muslims believe their *ummah* (a term associated with both religiously inclusive and exclusive meanings in the sources) to be 'the best community' (Qur'an: 3.110; 4.41; 16.89 – see Dallal 1995), a new chosen people open to all humanity. Nearly 1400 years later, Madinah remains the perfect expression of Islamic purity and power for Muslims (Metcalf 1996; Mandaville 2001).

While conquest, trade and imperialism over many centuries eventually saw Islam territorialized in myriad places from Morocco in the west to Indonesia in the east, large-scale conversions were not at first encouraged amongst the Muslims as they burst out of the Arabian peninsula. Islam ceased to be a closed hereditary caste (a diasporic ethnic group?), becoming a cosmopolitan civilisation rather than the Arab kingdom of the Umayyads (661-750) only as it travelled and universalized, a new peace economy based on trade emerging under the Abbasids (750-1258). Among the new urban elite was a class of religious scholars who confirmed a mature Sunni orthodoxy (Lapidus 2002; Rippin 2005). Indeed, some controversial revisionist historians even suggest that Islam's myth of origins is a product of this period. In any case, the emergence of Sunnism is a story of various localized Muslim knowledges, from Madinah in Arabia to Kufa in Iraq, being relativized and normatively re-organized trans-locally in conversation with Muslims elsewhere (cf. Mandaville 2001). Notably, it achieved authority without a centralized structure (four schools – *madhahib* - of law being authenticated, although no others emerged after the tenth century).

In 1258 Baghdad finally fell to the Mongol invaders (who eventually became Muslim themselves), but the political / territorial decentralisation and fragmentation of the Abbasid Empire had been evident for some time. Certainly the institution of the Caliph (deputy of God / his Prophet) had lost its significance as a symbol of pan-Islamic political integration. Indeed, medieval Islam was marked by a period of world-wide diffusion and pluralisation, with Muslims of Persian, Turkic and Central/South/South East Asian origin eventually outnumbering Arabs. However, the religious beliefs and legal practices that Muslims shared provided 'a sort of citizenship' (Dallal 1995: 269) in the homeland(ish) entity of *dar al-Islam* (the abode of Islam). Travelling scholars, Sufis and pilgrims integrated diverse populations into shared universes of meaning across tribal, agrarian and urban societies. While 'Islamizing the indigenous' necessarily involves numerous fractures and breaks, and orthodoxy's claims to universality can never be completed, the very career of Islam thus reflects the enduring power of its religious imaginary.

Perhaps because it achieved the status of a dominant ideology, Mandaville (2001) argues that it is difficult to speak of Muslims' collective effort to mobilize as a political community from its origins in Madinah until the period of globalized modernity. Pan-Islamist activists such as the peripatetic Persian, Jamal al-din al-Afghani (d.1897) and those involved in the movement to revive the Ottoman Caliphate (disestablished by Mustapha Kemal in 1924) called for the *ummah* to reawaken and unite in a bid to repulse European colonisers from *dar al-Islam*. With greater consciousness of the world as a single place, and their own relativized position within it at a time of growing literacy, nationalism and print capitalism, well-established patterns of religious revival in Islam became a vehicle for a new sort of identity politics

amongst Muslim elites. While some adopted strategies of *hijrah* from and *jihād* against Muslim and non-Muslim ‘Others’ in the dislocated present, more characteristic was the general desire to return – more or less imaginatively (*ijtihād* being the term for effort in interpretation) – to a sacred home and ancestors of the past, in the hope of making a better future (cf. Asad 1986). Loathe to simply accept the West’s attempts to copyright modernity, the emergence of Islamism in its many variants can be viewed as an attempt to narrate a rival universality (Sayyid 1997).

British-Pakistanis, diasporic predicaments and Islamic identities

In the postcolonial period, an identity politics with Islamic revivalism at its centre eventually gained new strength in the Muslim world from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. Often oppressive, secular nationalist regimes were struggling to deliver development equitably to growing, youthful populations with higher expectations and, as the Iranian revolution of 1979 demonstrated so iconically, Islam(ism) became more central to articulating political alternatives. Nascent Muslim diasporas like British-Pakistanis were not at all isolated from such processes. With initial support from movements such as Jama’at-i Islami, which had a small but well organized following amongst mainly urban origin migrants (often students and professionals) in the UK, General Zia ul-Haq (1977-1986) initiated a policy of Islamization in their homeland. Moreover, as the recollections of British-Pakistani writer, Ziauddin Sardar (2004), begin to document, a network of activist-intellectuals in London were being courted by Iran (Kalim Siddiqui’s Muslim Institute) but also Saudi Arabia as the two went head-to-head for leadership of the putative global *ummah*.

For demographic reasons, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that such discourses impacted on significant numbers of British-born and educated Pakistanis. Educated segments of this generation especially embraced the idea of a universalizing, 'true' Islam as a serious strategy of self-identification which mapped out clear boundaries for behaviour in the testing context of cultural pluralisation (J. Jacobson 1998). They distinguished a faith rediscovered anew through personal exploration and participation in study circles from the ethno-cultural and highly sectarian homeland oriented Islam of their (often uneducated) parents (Lewis 1994). Unlike the rote Islam of the Urdu-speaking mosques, in its new, multi-ethnic and English vernacular 'true' Islam opened up a more cosmopolitical consciousness and reinvented religion as a badge of pride, a tool with which efforts could be made to transcend increasingly evident circumstances of local deprivation and racist social exclusion (Modood 1990). Even amongst those who were not pious or educated, and were gradually assimilating aspects of English working class culture, Islam as identity made a lot of sense. For all their continuing pride in being Pakistani, British-born youth do not feel 'at home' when they visit Panjab or Kashmir (McLoughlin and Kalra 1999).

Grassroots British-Pakistani communities had made the case for the public recognition of Islam in an *ad hoc*, locally agreed fashion as part of multicultural policies since the early 1980s (Lewis 1994). However, the era of a truly diasporic Muslim identity politics was catalysed only during the Rushdie Affair of 1989, events being played out on a national and global scale. The perceived attack on Islam with the support and consent of dystopic Western powers and other conspirators produced often to be repeated utopian *ummatic* discourse, expressed most obviously in the Ayatollah's *fatwa*, calling for unity and self-reliant action amongst Muslims as a victimized community. With the mass media relaying news of the book, protests and interventions in the debate by religious movements and leaders (Bhatt

1997), many Pakistanis, British-Muslims and their co-religionists across the globe mobilized against *The Satanic Verses*, temporarily forgetting their ethnic, sectarian and other differences.

Indeed, during the last two decades, coverage of political crises involving the occupation of Islamic lands and the plight of Muslim minorities world-wide has sustained a consciousness of such issues, and the fables that surround them (Werbner 2002b), so consistently that global events now represent a key factor in being British-Pakistani. The Gulf and Bosnian wars of the early to mid-1990s, as well as the ongoing conflicts in Palestine and Kashmir, and since 9/11 the so-called 'war on terror' in Afghanistan and Iraq, have all triggered heartfelt (and increasingly publicly performed) conflicts of loyalty and co-responsibility. Most often this resulted in peaceful protest or other contributions to an increasingly transnational Muslim civil society, for example, in terms of charitable giving (McLoughlin 1996). But, for a small number, it meant taking up arms, at first overseas and then at 'home' in the hostland as the events of 7/7 demonstrate (cf. Begg 2006). For Werbner (2002b) these are typically diasporic predicaments.

Further Reading

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