

# Islam in Transition

Religion and identity among  
British Pakistani youth

Jessica Jacobson



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## ISLAM IN TRANSITION

Young British Pakistanis live in a social world made up of many diverse elements. From their parents, they learn about Pakistan and about the way of life that is Islam. From Muslim and Pakistani friends, they learn much about their shared heritage. At the same time, they learn about the British culture of which they are a part and which is a part of them; but they discover too that, in the eyes of some, they can never be 'truly' British because of their dark skin and 'foreign' religion.

*Islam in Transition* explores the complex interrelationship between the ethnic, national and religious identities of young British Pakistanis. In particular, it focuses on the ways in which Islamic religion engenders powerful loyalties within a predominantly secular society and how, in their adherence to their religion, many young Muslims find a welcome sense of stability and permanence. The author presents material collected in a field-work study and quotes extensively from research interviews, in considering how it is that traditional sources of authority and allegiance survive in a world within which there seem to be abundant opportunities to challenge previously accepted concepts of identity.

**Jessica Jacobson** is currently working as a researcher for the Home Office.

For Kassim  
with love and thanks

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The research was originally conducted for a doctoral thesis, which I completed in the Sociology Department of the London School of Economics. Here I was privileged to study under the supervision of Professor Anthony Smith. I have benefited enormously from working with someone who offered not only outstanding scholarly insights, but also warm concern and ceaseless moral support.

I am grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council, which funded my doctoral studies.

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# INTRODUCTION

## **The issues**

The general problem addressed by this book is that of understanding the conditions of the survival and revival of tradition, especially religious tradition, in modern society. Social scientists have long been concerned with documenting the apparent fragmentation of traditional social ties and the decline of established sources of authority, both of which processes are assumed to be elements of the general 'modernisation' of societies. Today, many scholars reject earlier assumptions about the progress of societies towards a universal, modern form; they remain convinced, however, that traditional sources of allegiance and authority – such as the family, the nation, the ethnic group and religion – are playing ever diminishing roles in people's lives. Accordingly, in what is now a 'postmodern' world individuals have access to a multiplicity of identities; and new identities are constantly being created through the merging and intermingling of previously discrete social categories.

This study arose out of a concern with the questions of to what extent and why, notwithstanding the evidently widespread changes in patterns of identity that have occurred within Western nation-states, some traditional sources of social differentiation retain significance. My special interest has been in the ways in which, in particular, a minority religious tradition can act as a focus of allegiance in the face of what appear to be abundant opportunities to challenge the old bases of authority.

In contemporary Britain, Islam is a minority religion which is especially dynamic, and indeed seems in recent years to have been undergoing something of a revival. It was on these grounds that I decided to approach the question of the survival of religious tradition by conducting a study of attitudes among British Muslims. More specifically, I decided to focus on Pakistanis, who make up the largest sub-group within the heterogeneous British Muslim minority. This narrowing of the study would, I assumed, lend the project greater coherence, and would enable me to explore the interrelationship between commitment to a religion and attachment to a perceived place of origin as bases of identity. Furthermore, I decided to look specifically at the 'second generation' of British



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Pakistanis – that is, young people whose parents emigrated to Britain from Pakistan – in order to investigate the ways in which the experience of growing up in Britain, with British nationality, influences attitudes to the minority religion and notions of ethnicity.

The research problem was therefore defined as follows:

In what terms do second-generation British Pakistanis conceive of their own nationality, ethnicity and religion? Of these sources of social identity available to them, why does religion appear to have an especially strong appeal?

The aim of this study was to find some answers to these questions by conducting an empirical study of a qualitative nature, involving a series of interviews and discussions with young British Pakistanis. I decided to conduct the field-work within a single locality so that I could explore the social environment within which the respondents' identities have emerged, and compare the responses of the different individuals to what are broadly similar influences. The field-work was carried out in Waltham Forest, a London borough with a large Pakistani population.

It must be noted that the use of the term 'British Pakistanis' is somewhat contentious: I found that, for reasons that are discussed over the course of the book, a number of my respondents do not like to call themselves 'Pakistani' and/or 'British'. For the sake of clarity, however, it is necessary for me to use a specific and fixed term in referring to the subjects of the study, and it seems that the phrase 'British Pakistani' informs the reader – in a way that is concise, reasonably precise and as neutral as possible – that the respondents are of Pakistani background and have British nationality. The broader term 'Asian' is used throughout the book in the same way as it is used in popular discourse in Britain: that is, to refer to people from Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian backgrounds. The extent to which the respondents perceive themselves to be members of the 'Asian' minority in Britain is discussed in Chapter 5.

Another terminological note of caution that must be inserted here concerns the use of the phrase 'Pakistani community'. This phrase appears throughout this book because it is the shortest way of referring collectively to individuals of Pakistani descent living in Waltham Forest; however, it is a problematic term since those very individuals can at different times orient themselves towards different kinds of minority 'community': most notably the 'Muslim community' or the 'Asian community'. Indeed, the terms 'Pakistani', 'Asian' and 'Muslim' were frequently used interchangeably by my respondents in talk about the minority group, partly because the bulk of the population of both the Asian and the Muslim minority in Waltham Forest happens to be Pakistani. Baumann, in his study of 'discourses of identity' in Southall, writes at length about the degree to which Southallians 'regarded themselves as members of several *communities* at once, each with its own *culture*. Making one's life meant ranging across them' [original

emphases] (1996: 5). Although, as Baumann writes, in most contexts the existence of five major ‘communities’ – Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Afro-Caribbean and white – is taken for granted in Southall, a great many cross-cutting social cleavages have significance for the population of the area: including class, birth-place, own or parents’ nationality, mother-tongue and preferred language.

Of course, my study is addressing the very question of how the respondents tend to describe and understand the social groups to which they belong; in particular, I have been interested in tracing the apparent differences between their own and their parents’ definitions of the salient minority community. In writing of the local ‘Pakistani community’ I am thus referring to an entity whose parameters are shifting and evolving; and indeed my concern is primarily with the direction or directions of change. I have found it useful, when employing this problematic phrase, to keep in mind the comment made by one of my respondents in Waltham Forest in reply to a question about what it is like to live in a ‘Pakistani community’: he pointed out, ‘No one got down and said – with pen and paper, books – oh we’re gonna start a community up, who wants to join? It just happens.’

### **The framework**

Social scientists have frequently sought to address questions relating to minority identity by referring to structural issues; in particular, gender, class and racism tend to be treated as explanatory factors. However, my intention in undertaking this study has from the outset been to develop an understanding of the issues which is based on an analysis of meanings imputed to their situation and articulated by the subjects themselves. The results of my research have persuaded me that while structural factors by definition shape any given social context within which identities are articulated, sociological understanding of issues of identity can be greatly advanced through a close examination of the ways in which actors, both collectively and as individuals, develop and manipulate the range of social concepts available to them.

My approach to the study of identity-formation among young British Pakistanis has produced many conclusions with regard to the respondents’ conceptualisations of nationality, ethnicity and religion, and the reasons why religion remains a particularly significant source of identity for them. These conclusions have been ordered into an explanatory framework which comprises two closely interlinked lines of argument.

The first line of argument draws on the concept of ‘social boundaries’ as a tool for analysing the various ways in which young British Pakistanis differentiate themselves, or feel that they are differentiated, from non-members of the minority group. I have identified several boundary processes which help to shape the identities of young British Pakistanis. First, the young people position themselves in relation to ‘boundaries of Britishness’, which define what it is to be British and include, for example, ethnic definitions of the nation and definitions based on concepts of citizenship. Second, the older generation of British Pakistanis seek to

preserve what I term the 'parental boundaries', which encompass a relatively narrow definition of their minority community. This definition is predicated on the need for members of the community to maintain different standards of behaviour from the majority. Third, the young people are themselves in the process of reconstructing 'ethnic boundaries' through which they define themselves – in a manner different from and often looser than that of their parents – as Pakistani or, more broadly, as Asian in terms of cultural traditions and social patterns. Finally, young British Pakistanis, together with other British Muslims, are engaged in the process of constructing a set of 'religious boundaries' which enhance their own sense of identity as Muslims. It is in the nature of the teachings of Islam that these last-mentioned boundaries should be clear-cut and pervasive, which is in itself a source of their strength.

The second, closely related line of argument which I develop over the course of this book focuses on religion, and considers the role of Islam as a source of guidance in the lives of the young people. It is my contention that, as is evident from what has been said above, the social environment inevitably contains many contradictions for young people who have grown up in Britain as the children of immigrants from Pakistan. I would suggest these contradictions are a potential source of uncertainty; and that a large part of the appeal of religion to the young people lies in the fact that Islam provides a means of dealing with the ambiguities and dilemmas of their circumstances. For many of them, its teachings are a source of clear and coherent guidance on all aspects of day-to-day life.

As I have already suggested, structural factors relating to gender, class and racism are treated as background rather than foreground features of the analysis presented here. Gender is a theme that recurs in a variety of contexts in the pages that follow: it is made clear that to a large extent the men and the women of whom I write have different kinds of experiences, and make sense of them in different kinds of ways. However, there are also many commonalities in the experiences and attitudes of the men and the women, to which I draw attention. Gender is thus not treated as a key explanatory factor, but rather as an issue of special interest.

I deliberately chose not to look at the impact of class on expressions of identity; hence I decided to hold the variable of 'class background' constant by drawing my sample of respondents from what can be broadly described as a working-class population. It seems evident that an attempt to examine the relationship between class and identity would involve a much larger-scale empirical study than the one I have undertaken. Even within my relatively homogeneous sample there was a sufficient degree of diversity in terms of socio-economic factors to alert me to the fact that any analysis which seeks to incorporate a consideration of class must treat this as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon if it is to avoid crude reductionism. Such an analysis would have to take into account the levels of education and current occupations of the subjects as well as their family backgrounds.

Issues of 'race' and racism are, unlike class issues, of direct relevance to this study, given my general interest in the ways in which individuals define the social groups to which they belong. However, my analysis does not treat the power rela-

tions manifest in racism as key variables in themselves. It is clear to me that the study of structural issues on the one hand, and of individuals' definitions of their situations on the other hand, are alternative but equally valid levels of analysis. I hope that the arguments elaborated in this book – which are the outcome of determined efforts to let the subjects of the study speak for themselves and to develop an analysis closely grounded in and therefore relevant to their concerns – demonstrate the merits of this kind of project. Furthermore, it should be noted that my focus on the individual has not encouraged me to overlook the significance of issues of 'race'. Rather, it means that while I have not explored ideological structures of racism, I have paid attention to the impact of my respondents' *perceptions* of racism on their conceptualisations of 'Britishness' and, ultimately, on their ethnic and religious identities.

### **The structure of the book**

The book has two main parts. The first sets the issues of primary concern in a broad theoretical and socio-historical context. The second part, which makes up the bulk of the book, is devoted to a detailed discussion of the findings of the empirical research and the general conclusions that I have drawn from them. In the presentation of the findings, I include many direct quotations from the research interviews, together with detailed overviews of what was said on each issue, in order to convey as accurately as possible the views of the subjects of the study, and demonstrate the grounding of my general conclusions in the empirical material.

It should be noted that the inclusion of direct quotations is useful not only because these convey interesting viewpoints, but also because in a great many cases the manner of expression is itself worthy of note. In much of what was said in the interviews, an interesting linguistic mix makes itself apparent, in the sense that colloquialisms common to all young people in London are tightly interwoven with the use of words and phrases that are specifically Muslim and/or South Asian in origin. While the instances of this linguistic mix are too common for me to draw attention to individual cases, the reader should look out for them as they are in themselves a vivid illustration of how different ways of communicating and thinking about the world can encounter one another and merge within individual lives.

The book as a whole is made up of seven chapters. Chapter 1 locates the research problem that this study addresses within theoretical debates on the subjects of identity, ethnicity and religion. Chapter 2 describes the background to the young British Pakistanis' expressions of social identity. It encompasses a brief account of the central tenets of the Islamic religion, and an overview of the circumstances of Muslims living in Britain. Chapter 3 describes the location in which I carried out the empirical study, the methodology adopted and the process of field-work.

Chapter 4 opens the discussion of the empirical findings with an analysis of two

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boundary processes which give shape to the social circumstances of the respondents' lives: namely, the imposition of 'parental boundaries' by the older generation of British Pakistanis, and the location of the young people in relation to 'boundaries of Britishness'. Chapter 5 is an account of the ways in which the boundaries which frame the respondents' perceptions of their own ethnicity are evolving. The final two chapters are specifically concerned with the subject of religious identity: Chapter 6 seeks to understand the significance of Islam in the lives of the respondents by considering the ways in which it acts as a source of guidance; and Chapter 7 presents an analysis of the 'religious boundaries' constructed and maintained by the young people.

Part I

THEORY AND SOCIO-  
HISTORICAL CONTEXT



## SOCIAL IDENTITIES

My aim in this chapter is to explore some of the theoretical issues which underlie the key research questions addressed by this study: that is, the questions of how young British Pakistanis perceive their religion, ethnicity and nationality, and why religion appears to have an especially strong appeal for them. It is not my intention to present here a fixed theoretical framework which can be said to have guided from the outset my field-work and my analysis of the empirical findings. Rather, there has been a two-way relationship between the empirical and the theoretical aspects of the study: that is, as the process of data collection and analysis progressed, I constantly reviewed the theoretical suppositions in the light of what was coming to the fore. Thus, the conclusions which I have reached on the basis of my field-work and which are presented in subsequent chapters both follow from and feed into the theoretical concerns which are considered here.

### Identity

At the heart of this study is the notion of 'identity': a highly complex concept which has been considered from a wide variety of perspectives within the social sciences. Clearly it is impossible to provide an overview of these perspectives here; what I intend to do, rather, is to outline briefly the concept of 'social identity' developed by the social psychologist Tajfel (1978), which has clarified my own general usage of the term 'identity'. I shall then move on to consider some of the available and most useful means of conceptualising ethnicity and religion as sources of identity in the lives of the young people who are the subjects of the study.

According to Hutnik (1985: 298), most social scientific definitions of identity belong to one of two broad types. Personality theorists regard identity in terms of 'a sense of personal distinctiveness, personal continuity and personal autonomy . . . in other words, the totality of the individual's self-construal'. On the other hand, the conceptions which are more common in sociology and social psychology 'tend to stress the fact that a sense of identity is formed from the dialectic between the individual and society', and, more particularly, draw attention to the ways in which membership of *social groups* shapes or determines



individuals' perceptions of themselves. These are key themes in George Herbert Mead's work on the process by which the individual acquires a full sense of self: according to Mead, the self develops 'by organizing [the] individual attitudes of others into . . . organized social or group attitudes'. This means that the self becomes 'an individual reflection of the general systematic pattern of social or group behavior in which it and the others are all involved' (1964: 222).

Tajfel's theory of 'social identity' provides the basis for a systematic investigation of the relationship between individuals' self-definitions and their perceptions of the social categories to which they and others around them belong. Tajfel writes that there are three components to group membership: first, the cognitive (knowledge that one belongs to a group); second, the evaluative (assumptions about the positive or negative value connotations of group membership); and third, the emotional (emotions towards one's group and towards others who stand in particular relations to it). For Tajfel, social identity is, then, 'that *part* of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' [original emphasis] (1978: 63).

According to this definition of social identity, the ethnic identity of any of my respondents is his or her knowledge, values and feelings in relation to membership of an ethnic minority that originates in Pakistan and/or the Indian subcontinent; the religious identity is, likewise, his or her knowledge, values and feelings relating to membership of the Muslim minority in Britain and also the global Muslim *umma* (community of believers); and the national identity is his or her knowledge, values and feelings relating to membership, as a British citizen, of the population of that country.

As the above definitions, and indeed my framing of the research problem, make clear, I am treating the young people's expressions of ethnic identity and religious identity as separate phenomena. In contrast, many scholars in the field of ethnicity tend to regard religion as a component of ethnic identity: for example, Nash (1989) lists religion along with nationality, shared history, language and 'body' – that is, assumptions about biological origins expressed in terms of genes, blood, flesh and so on – as the basic 'building blocks' of ethnicity. In the case of people of Pakistani descent, ethnicity as a source of identity is undoubtedly closely related to religion: the history of Pakistan – founded as a nation for India's Muslims – ensures that Pakistanis are likely to associate being Pakistani with being Muslim. In addition, given that Pakistanis make up the largest Muslim group in the area in which I conducted my field-work, there is little to distinguish the local 'Muslim' from the local 'Pakistani' community, and religious and 'ethnic' traditions are inevitably intertwined in day-to-day social practices.

That much said, my decision to treat religion and ethnicity as different bases of social identity, despite their being so closely intertwined, is partially based on the belief that there is a useful analytic distinction to be made between commitment to a universalistic religion with a global reach and membership of a social group defined with reference to a place of origin. Furthermore, as I shall demonstrate