Preface

This is a work of collaboration by two friends committed to understanding and making sense of Islam, especially as lived within the many different Muslim communities in Britain today. Both of us have written on Islam in Britain.[1] One of us is an insider, the other an outsider. Philip has spent thirty years building bridges across the different religious and secular traditions, learning to share public and civic life in Bradford, as the Inter-faith Adviser to a series of Anglican bishops in that city. For fifteen years, he also lectured on 'Islam in the West' and 'Religions, conflict and peacemaking in a post-secular world' in the Peace Studies Department at Bradford University. Sadek has also engaged with different British Muslim communities for over three decades as an activist, youth and community development professional and academic. He has taught Islamic Studies at the Universities of Chester and Liverpool Hope and is currently a Research Associate at the Oxford University Centre for Islamic Studies. He has written widely on issues relating to British Muslims, young people and religious identity formation.

We have sought to write a short and accessible book which aims to offer insight and perspectives about Islam and Muslim communities in Britain today. We draw upon existing scholarship on contemporary Islam and material produced by British Muslims. However, our primary audience is not other academics, but professionals such as teachers, social workers, journalists and politicians working with Muslim communities, frequently bombarded with contradictory images of Islam and British Muslims. We hope this study contributes to 'religious literacy', a precondition for our religiously and ethnically diverse cities to cohere and flourish. To this end we have appended a short annotated bibliography of key texts, as well as useful web resources.

We hope the interested general reader will also enjoy the book. We share many assumptions which can be captured in three words: crisis, candour and context. We labour under no illusions that many parts of the wider Muslim world are in turmoil, especially the Middle East and South Asia. It is obvious that British Muslims, with a diversity of transnational, ethnic links are not immune to such developments. This is not a work of apologetics and Chapter 4 addresses directly the dynamics and scale of radicalisation and prospects for de-radicalisation. However, the primary focus of this work is not radicalisation, but rather how different generations navigate relations across three distinct religious and social worlds: traditional Islam imported from their relatives' homeland; expressions of Islam drawn from across the Muslim world – the *ummah* – now accessible at the click of a mouse; and Britain itself, where among a young generation of graduates and professionals, who are seeking new and expansive readings of Islam to connect with their lived experience.

Crises within any minority community can engender candour and self-criticism, as well as defensiveness and denial. In this book we quarry from a rich vein of constructive self-criticism which has emerged in the last ten years, often in surprising places, whether from within movements usually dismissed as scholastic traditionalists, such as Deobandis and Salafis, or the more self-consciously, politicised movements dubbed Islamist.[2]

Many of the hopeful developments we identify and discuss are condensed in the term 'context' or better 'contextualising' Islam in Britain. Inevitably, when Muslim migrants first began to arrive in large numbers from the 1960s to fill post-war labour shortages in textiles, foundries and transport, their Islam was embedded in the ethnic cultures they brought with them. For the first generation of Muslim migrants, most of whom came from rural areas of South Asia, culture, religion and ethnicity were unselfconsciously conflated. For their children and grandchildren this would no longer do, as they faced questions from school friends, neighbours and colleagues. This forced them to become self-conscious and articulate. As questioning became more relentless and critical, post 9/11 and 7/7, they struggled to get adequate answers from religious leaders – *ulama*. This exposed systematic deficits in the religious formation of such leaders, many of whom were either trained overseas or in 'seminaries' in Britain which were little more than satellites of an intellectual tradition 'back home'. In short, religious formation even in British institutions was frequently out of context and did not give the *imam* in the mosque or religious, legal specialist – the *mufti* – the knowledge and skills to adapt their teaching to the needs of British Muslims.

For this reason there is much experimentation going on across different Muslim traditions to contextualise Islam in Britain. Chapter 2 is devoted to understanding the lively debates around changes needed in curriculum and methods in 'Islamic seminaries'. Chapter 3 seeks to rehearse the new thinking and debates about the relationship between sharia, ethics and public life. This includes attempts to identify resources within the tradition to live well as a minority in a non-Muslim country, as well as searching for insights and perspectives to constrain the excesses of the modern state, whether in Muslim majority or minority situations. Chapter 4 contextualises the difficult and complex matter of violence in the name of Islam and situates the current debates about extremist radicalisation within a historical and political context.

All of these debates indicate an attempt by Muslims to disaggregate Islam from religious and cultural norms deemed dysfunctional in Britain, as well as challenging some of the assumptions of transnational Muslim movements whether Islamist, Salafi or Sufi. This task is urgent if Islam is not to appear alien and exotic. When writing about Islam we wish to escape an unhelpful binary of good Muslim/bad Muslim and enable a grown-up discussion of complexity.[3]

As will become clear, we neither assume that British Muslims are somehow uniquely 'religious' or that Islam in reality impacts the lives of all British Muslims in the same way. A recent study on political participation among young British Muslims observed that they are far from homogeneous as a group. There are 'crucial variations in their strengths of religious and national identities, their orientations towards British society and their modes of political engagement'. In fact, the author identifies four different sorts of young Muslims:

> [T]hose who downplay their Muslim identification and retain simply a symbolic ethno-religious identity; those with a cosmopolitan, internationalist and multicultural identity; those with a dual identity, thinking of themselves as British Muslims (the largest single group); and finally a small group who prioritise their Muslim identity and for whom a British identity is at best secondary and purely pragmatic, with little emotional attachment to Britain.[4]

For Muslims, as with people of other faiths, religion has to jostle with the demands of other influences that are national, ethnic, political, professional, gendered and cultural. Chapter 5 looks at these new expressions of identity, religion and culture that range from what has been called the 'Muslim Cool', through the performances of young Muslim comedians such as 'Guz Khan', to the normalisation of celebrities from a Muslim background. The latter is demonstrated with England cricketer Moeen Ali and the victory of Nadiya Hussain, who won the BBC's *Great British Bake Off* competition in 2015.[5]

The larger argument of the book is that Muslims in Britain are giving expression to Islam in a new language – English – and that this is contributing to a significant chapter in the modern history of Islam. In its long historical trajectory, Islam has been embodied in a multiplicity of distinct languages and cultures. If we mention only majority Muslim areas, we must speak of at least five main language groups: Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu and Bengali. It is our contention that English today could be as significant as Persian was in the past, as a vehicle for generating new thinking for emerging Muslim elites.[6]

This, in part, is the burden of Chapter 1 which suggests that while reformist Muslim thinking has been around as an intellectual trend for more than a hundred years, the emergence of a newly educated, English-speaking, professional and graduate class – especially women – is beginning to mainstream such progressive thinking into various organisations that draw upon the pioneering scholarship which underpins the ever expanding, international networks of Muslim women's organisations.

Through the medium of English, academics, religious scholars and activists alike are able to apply the insights and methods generated by the social sciences, arts and humanities, to contested contemporary issues. Throughout the book, we contrast such thinking with the traditional pull of South Asian 'schools of thought' 'ideologically and institutionally dominant' in the UK where the medium of instruction remains Urdu.[7] The contrast underlines the centrality of a mastery of English in the process of critical self-renewal of the Islamic tradition now underway.

We would like to thank Carole Hillenbrand, Nicola Ramsey and Kirsty Woods at Edinburgh University Press and the people who were kind enough to respond to queries about the subject matter in this book.

Notes

1. Philip Lewis's last book, with a foreword by Jon Snow, is '*Young, British and Muslim* (London: Continuum, 2007) and he has a chapter coming out in the Routledge *Handbook of Christian Muslim Relations* (2018), edited by David Thomas, entitled 'Muslims and Christians in Britain today: living together, respecting differences?' Sadek Hamid's recent publications include *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists: The Contested Ground of British Islamic Activism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2016) and *Young British Muslims: Between Rhetoric and Realities* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2017).
2. See Innes Bowen, *Medina in Birmingham, Najaf in Brent, Inside British Islam* (London: Hurst & Co., 2014) for an accessible overview of the main Islamic traditions in Britain and their transnational links. Also, Sadek's *Sufis, Salafis and Islamists* for inter-generational changes in many of the key movements.
3. The spirit of this work is best captured in the title of a helpful study edited by Andrew Shryock, *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010). This is not to trivialise the phenomenon of anti-Muslim hatred but simply to insist that Muslim communities are not best understood as simply victims.

4. Asma Mustafa, *Identity and Political Participation Among Young British Muslims: Believing and Belonging* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. xi.
5. See Charlotte Higgins, 'The Genius of "The Great British Bake Off"' where she notes that Nadiya was 'the first British woman who wears a hijab to have occupied such a positive, joyous role in British mass culture'. *The Guardian*, 6 October 2015.
6. For the importance of Persian as the vehicle for half a millennium – until the mid-nineteenth century – of a distinct Islamic civilisation from the Balkans to Bengal, which sought to create Islamic meaning drawing on literature, Sufism, philosophy rather than simply privileging 'law', see the wonderfully, wide-ranging and stimulating study of the late Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
7. See Sophie Gilliat-Ray, *Muslims in Britain, an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 92, where she is speaking of the Deobandis whom we discuss in Chapter 2. Throughout our study we illustrate the continuing influence of South Asian Deobandi scholars by reference particularly to Justice Mufti Taqi Usmani, an influential Deobandi luminary in Pakistan whose works are widely circulated in the UK.