Political integration of Muslims in Britain and the role of religion

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Introduction

After September 11th 2001 and many subsequent attacks on Western societies culminating in the bombing of London’s transport system on 7th July 2005, the perception of Islamic threat has grown in the eyes of the British public and the government. The most powerful question in the public mind is the role of Islam as a religion and a value system in the actual and potential support of Muslims for political extremism. The growing fear of Islamic religious radicalization feeds fears of Muslim religiosity per se. One of the reasons for the fear of Muslim religious identity and practise is its perceived link with the support for political extremism and violence. Additionally, there is an untested the assumption that extremism (whether religious or political) is more attractive to those Muslims who experience poverty, discrimination, social isolation and political alienation (Saggar 2008). Almost all literature concerning Islamist extremism in Britain refers to a smaller or larger extent to this link (e.g. Abbas 2007b, Eatwell 2006; Eatwell and Goodwin 2009). In contrast, the religious engagement of Christians has been shown and is widely accepted to be a panacea against alienation and social exclusion, rather than an alternative to other positive social identities, and to lead to many positive political and social outcomes such as political participation, higher levels of social capital etc (REF).
The negative perception of Muslims’ religion and religiosity seems to have two sources. Firstly, it can be traced back to the powerful, however many times rebutted, myth of a cultural clash between Islam and Western values, with Islamic culture being hostile to Western political values such as liberalism and democracy (Huntington 1996). Secondly, it is a result of a simple discord between a powerful social trend of secularization present among most Western societies and the still high levels of religiosity among Western Muslims. Thus Muslims’ religiosity and their religious identity is automatically perceived as an unorthodox form of behaviour. In the Muslim world, an opposing trend of rising religiosity may even be noted since the 1980s (Pargeter 2008), thus widening the cultural gap. This cultural gap is often considered as a reason for concern from the point of view of political integration (Shore 2006). A recent poll for Theos showed 42% Britons agreed with a controversial statement that religion is worse than chicken-pox. Religiosity among Muslims maybe at odds with the general trend, but not as much as is usually assumed. The widely spread assumption that immigrants, especially from the less developed parts of the world, are more religious is a matter of generational decline as well. Voas and Crockett (YR) have demonstrated that children of immigrants also show signs of secularization in comparison to their parents. The Citizenship Surveys confirm this finding; young Muslims born in Britain are less rather than (as is frequently claimed) more religious than their immigrant parents. In the dataset used here, 75.4 per cent of Muslims declare themselves as practicing while only 31.1 per cent of Christians and 56.4 per cent of those adhering to other ‘minority’ religions do, but there is evidence of shallow generational decline: 73.5 per cent Muslims born in Britain say they practise Islam, when it is 76.2 per cent amongst their parents. Hence the notion that religion is
forming an alternative source of identity for alienated British Muslim youth (Awan 2007; Spalek 2007) already looks like an exceptional phenomenon rather than a general social trend.

To assess the real extent of political exclusion among Muslim Britons we will use three widely accepted indicators of political exclusion, (i) trust in institutions, (ii) feeling of political efficacy (influence), and (iii) political participation, as well as a more direct fourth indicator, (iv) a sense of belonging to Britain (Figure 1), and two indicators of exclusion (i) perception of racial prejudice and (ii) religious prejudice (Figure 2).

**Figure 1 Four indicators of political alienation**

The picture of Muslim Britons as a politically alienated and disengaged group is mixed; while Muslims do seem to be relatively disengaged and may feel excluded on the basis of prejudice, they also seem satisfied with their political influence, trust political institutions and feel they belonging to Britain, in fact on many of the indicators better than other minority religions, predominantly white Christians and also mostly white people with no religion. They are less likely to participate, however, a little more likely to participate often when they do participate, suggesting that there is a small minority within the Muslim community who are very engaged in civic politics. However, the participation figures do not include voting, which is a fundamental act of citizen engagement, and some research shows their turnout may even be higher than white people (Fieldhouse and Cutts 2008).
Figure 2 Perceptions of racial and religious prejudice: path to exclusion?

Looking at perception of prejudice, we can see Muslims are surprisingly more optimistic about both forms of prejudice than majority Christians and people with no religious affiliation. However, they do perceive more prejudice than the other minority religious groups, a difference which is statistically significant. Muslims are more aware than other minority religions of the possibilities of both racial and religious exclusion. In this sense, they may be at greater risk from social alienation.

But the main question is whether, as is often alleged, a religious identity steps in when the traditional identities and sources of belonging fail, or on the contrary correlates with good civic posture.

Figure 3 Alienation and exclusion by religiosity

Looking at the four indicators of political alienation and two indicators of exclusion due to prejudice we can see immediately that there are almost no differences between religious and non-religious Muslims. The only statistically significant difference is the counter-intuitive finding that non-religious Muslims have a greater awareness of religious prejudice. It is likely that other reasons lie behind this difference, for example levels of education that may contribute to a greater awareness of prejudice in society and lower levels of religiosity (Portes 1984). It could also be the effect of being young and born in
Britain, with both of those correlating with lesser religiosity and, as we will see soon, a greater perception of prejudice.

Generally the religious Muslims are not excluded or alienated more than non-religious Muslims, suggesting that Muslim religion and identity is not a replacement for British citizenship engagement and sense of belonging, and does not cause withdrawal from ‘Western’ political life or society.

**Conclusions: religion is neither a miracle cure nor a source of the problem**

The most striking result of the analysis presented in this chapter is the picture of politically well-integrated Muslims, both religious and secular, who express a strong sense of belonging to British society. While this particular research does not look at the very real problems of socio-economic deprivation within Muslim communities (see the Introduction to this volume), the analysis of political indicators presents an optimistic picture which stands at odds with the prevailing public view. In much of the public and academic debate on this issue, it is a standard assumption that Muslims - and especially young Muslims - are facing problems integrating and that as a result of these problems they find release and an alternative in religious identity and observance. Looking at the survey data, for the majority of Muslims it seems to be almost to the contrary. Muslims appear to be very well integrated on most indicators, such as support for democracy measures (i.e. trust and efficacy) and sense of belonging to Britain. Moreover, there is no evidence that less integrated Muslims are turning to religion as a source of an alternative
identity. Although, there is also no evidence that religion performs an especially positive role in their civic engagement.

The two indicators that do affirm the vulnerable position of Muslims in contemporary Britain are their heightened perceptions of religious prejudice and their lower levels of civic activism. It signals a sense of exclusion, an externally imposed marginalization from mainstream society, places Muslims at its fringes. Along similar lines, Saggar (2008) identifies prejudice against Muslims as one of the most important problems facing the government and British society, as it may turn these communities into social and political pariahs, thereby undermining prospects for integration in the long-term. The widespread belief that Islam is functioning as an alternative and oppositional identity to the British one clearly may contribute to the problem.
Bibliography

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Mean institutional trust

Mean sense of belonging
Figure 2

**Amount of racial prejudice in Britain today**

- **Muslim**
- **Other minority religions**
- **Christians**
- **no religion**

- **less than 5 years ago**
- **more than 5 years ago**
- **the same**
- **don't know**

**Amount of religious prejudice in the UK**

- **Muslim**
- **Other minority religions**
- **Christians**
- **no religion**

- **a lot**
- **a fair amount**
- **a little**
- **none**
- **don't know**
Figure 3

Religiosity and alienation

![Bar Chart]

1: low; 4: high

- Practising
- Not practising

Other chart:

- %

- Did not participate
- Have influence in UK
- More racial prejudice than 5 yrs ago
- A lot and fairly a lot religious prejudice*

* statistically significant