

## **The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800**

*Humayun Ansari*

*London: C. Hurst & Co., 2004. 406 pages.*

While written from a solid historical methodological approach, Ansari's *The Infidel Within* will surely appeal across disciplines to professors and students of Islam in the West, the social sciences, colonial and postcolonial studies, and ethnic and minority studies. This work is encyclopedic with regard to its many references to well-known and obscure pockets of Muslim communities that thrived and/or disappeared since Islam began to take root in Britain. Therefore, it will be an important tool for future advanced research and very helpful for the beginning student. This work combines astute social analysis with primary and secondary sources, including early Muslim newspapers in Britain, political speeches, and first-person narratives. Perhaps one of the book's greatest contributions is its dense quotations from first-person historical sources, which give the reader an authentic sense of what it must have been like to be a Muslim in Britain struggling with various cultural and religious issues.

The underlying question of this book is, simply put, considering the many waves of Muslim immigration, intermarriage, and evidence of indigenous conversion: Can there be a single British Muslim identity? Throughout the work, we are introduced to the many individuals who contributed to British Muslim heritage: poor immigrant seamen from every corner of the British Empire, high-ranking South Asian Muslims who intermingled with British high society, the more eccentric members of Muslim countries who came to Britain as visitors and became enduring caricatures in the popular British press, English converts who tried to universalize Islam along Unitarian theological lines, as well as the many charismatic Muslim leaders from various ethnic groups who promulgated Islam according to their own rejection of and/or adherence to their particular culture's manifestation of the Islamic experience.

Ansari's central premise is that understanding a community's development cannot occur without understanding the many cultural, class, ethnic, racial, and economic forces that are simultaneously at work within that community. From such a standpoint, the author traces the path of various Muslim communities as they took root throughout Britain at different class and ethnic levels. Furthermore, Ansari refuses to settle for any easy model that would explain the emergence of given communities. In fact, he situates

his discussion of both Muslim communities as well as indigenous English responses to them within a grounded historical framework tied to the waxing and waning of the British colonial endeavor. The book is divided into two main sections: Muslim communities before World War II, and those communities' subsequent development.

Particularly noteworthy sections of the author's argument take shape around discussions of notions of race, or "blackness," as well as gender, as it was often articulated with regard to examples of Muslim men marrying white women. Indigenous English reactions to Muslim communities were undoubtedly impacted by national economic circumstances. When Muslim men took up the important tasks done by British soldiers away at war, they acquired some economic stability and social acceptance. However, during times of relative economic hardship and the reintegration of English soldiers in the interwar periods, indigenous British reactions to Muslim populations became increasingly sharper. Popular discourse manifested itself in frenzied discussions of "saving" white women from marrying "black" (i.e., non-English) men. This discussion mirrored the fear of the empire's collapse and was symbolic of disintegrating power structures wherein "black" men were no longer entirely subordinate to white men. Ansari's analysis of this phenomenon recalls such classic works on "blackness" as those articulated by Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and other social theorists writing about the many ironies of the postcolonial subject's experience of living in the former colonial metropole.

As Muslim reactions to 9/11 have varied throughout the world, so too do they vary in Britain. It is perhaps in the variety of responses to this event that the distinctions among British Muslim communities become clear in a contemporary context. Despite great strides in education, higher socioeconomic standards of living, and the existence of Muslim institutions and their increased participation in British society and the political realm, 9/11 stirred up centuries-old discrimination against Muslims. Ansari points out that a marginal group of British Muslims do, in fact, subscribe to a "jihadist" mentality out of general sense of lost hope with regard to life in Britain. However, their marginalization is often not noted in the media, and younger generations of Muslims now face some of the same discrimination that previous generations of immigrants had to endure.

While young British Muslims today are far more apt to point out their rights as British citizens than their ancestors were, the fact that they

must still formulate ways to survive in a discriminatory environment raises the question of whether or not Muslims will ever be fully accepted in British society. While survival strategies a century ago often included modernization projects to incorporate Islam more thoroughly into western modes of living, today's generation questions not only Islam, but also the goals of modernity. Ansari concludes that today's younger generation actively questions traditional authority and is more willing to accept the hybrid nature of a pluralistic Islamic identity. This pluralism characterizes a transnational concept of an Islamic ummah that is less bound to nation and ethnicity, and is more concerned with an overarching Islamic ethic.

While the author's perspective that British Muslims today still face great hurdles in gaining acceptance from their non-Muslim counterparts is somewhat pessimistic, there is space for hope in his acknowledgement that members of today's generation have more resources and experience at their disposal to ensure that their voices may be heard more clearly than they might have been a century ago.

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