



“The infidel within.” Muslims in Britain since 1800, by Humayun Ansari. London, UK: C. Hurst & Co., 2004, XIV 438 p. Bibl. to p. 424. BP 14.95. ISBN 1 850 65685 1

Reviewed by [Wolfgang G. Schwanitz](#)

Among the first Muslims on the British islands were travelers, sailors, and settlers. During the Middle Ages, some of these had not gone there voluntarily; they were captured pirates who had practiced their trade off the shores of North Africa. The British subsequently got better acquainted with its Muslim neighbours, as the Empire lured additional numbers from the colonial peripheries into the centre.

Humayun Ansari presents his well-written history of Islam in Great Britain, focusing on the periods before and after the Second World War. In it, Dr. Ansari, a Professor at the University of London, raises this main question: has a British-Muslim identity developed? Indeed, he sheds light on this question by exploring the waves of Muslim arrivals to Britain. But one soon finds that there is no big common denominator among British Muslims, so colourful is the tapestry that the social fabric of these people forms.

British Muslims come from all over the world, speak many languages, and form social layers. Not only that, this mosaic grown increasingly complex as a result of the patterns of immigration in the two phases before and after 1975. There are now two million Muslims in Britain, three-quarters of them under 25 years of age. They will influence the country for many decades to come.

The historical part of this inspiring book will definitely stimulate scholars to do comparative studies, for instance in Central Europe where a similar work is lacking. *The Crescent and Brandenburg Gate: Muslims in Germany since 1731* is a study that has yet to be written. However, here I shed light only on Ansari's central question about British-Muslim identity. This scholar, whose own roots lie in Pakistan, starts with what Orientalists and Islamists have in common, that is stressing what separates Islam and the West in the light of their own homegrown minorities: the other, the opposite, or even the "infidel within".

For centuries, says Ansari, the secular West has stigmatized Islam as irrational, violent and fanatical. Consequently, the conclusion drawn in the West is that Muslims must be controlled and held at bay. The pictures of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the burning of the Salman Rushdie novel *Satanic Verses*, the "hysteria" surrounding the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, have further deepened the British public's antipathy towards Muslims. As a result, explains Ansari, Muslims are exposed to hostility. Although Prime Minister Tony Blair said that this does not arise from Islam in itself, the press lumps Muslims and extremists together. But according to public opinion polls, maintains the author, the great majority of Muslims are loyal to Great Britain.

Humayun Ansari hit the nail on the head. However, there is much more to think about. The deep Western fear of Islam is rooted in contemporary, not just historical circumstances. To be sure, attacks by Muslims on Europe have run for 1,000 years; and the continent was a hair's breath away from being under Ottoman rule. But it is also true that in the contemporary era of mass tourism, many citizens of the West have journeyed to the East. Having done so, few indeed would afterwards exchange their lifestyle in the West for that of the East, given the sharp differences in terms of human rights, civil society, and the role of women. These are only some of the reasons for so much Western "opposition" to Islam. What Ansari calls "hysteria around the Iraqi raid of Kuwait" is based on the history of Europe: If the swallowing up of a neighbouring country by the dictator of Baghdad had been permitted, it would have thrown the world back to the time after 1933, when the Nazis annexed one country after the other.

Ansari observes four trends among British Muslims. The first favors greater secularism. The second is devoted to dialogue, interaction, and assimilation. The third follows the religion more or less without compromise. Finally, a small fraction pursue *jihad*. How, then, to combat Muslim extremism, in Britain or anywhere else for that matter? After bombers struck in London on July 11, 2005 Prime Minister Tony Blair addressed this very question. He talked about an "evil ideology" that could only be beaten by confronting its "symptoms and causes, head-on, without compromise or delusion."

Rightly, the Prime Minister said: "In the end it is by the power of argument, debate, true religious faith and true legitimate politics that we will defeat this threat. What we are confronting here is an evil ideology. It is not a clash of civilizations - all civilized people, Muslim or other, feel revulsion at it. But it is a global struggle and it is a battle of ideas, hearts and minds, both within Islam and outside it. This is the battle that must be won, a battle not just about the terrorist methods, but their views. Not just about their barbaric acts, but their barbaric ideas. Not only what they do, but what they think and the thinking they would impose on others." Waging the battle of ideas that Blair proposes is, however, difficult in regard of the *Internet*.

The web, claims Ansari, is the medium through which different sides demonstrate their interpretations of Islam. Thus the web, in effect, serves as an alternative to the Western media, giving rise to the second trend mentioned above (i.e., the web facilitates interaction and dialogue). More than that, in a hostile climate the world wide web makes British Muslims more sensitive toward the differences that exist between them.

Globalization, says Humayun Ansari, brings to British Muslims a world in flux - a world where their specific Islamic identity interact with a vast environment with local, national, cultural, and linguistic elements. Globalization has spawned, among other things, electronic communities, including a *virtual umma*. There are digital mosques, bookshops, and chat rooms. Together, these form an Islamic cyber environment wherein Muslims discover their identity, according to their origins and every day lives. There they can read sermons, recitations of the Qur'an, and prayers, even in real-time. But this is the locus of factional fighting as well. Ansari speaks of a *web war* between different ideals, methods, or theological viewpoints, with rivals having no compunction about hacking each other's computer systems to destroy or steal data, or disrupt web sites.

Cyber Islamic environments have opened up not just for *jihad*, but also for *ijtihad*. As a result, there has been a loosening of the homogenizing stranglehold of orthodox Islamic organizations. Through multi-user dungeons and chat rooms, computer technology has enabled people to participate in discussions within Islamic perspectives, says Ansari. There are place where (young) British Muslims in particular are forging, (re-)discovering, reconciling, and struggling with their multiple badges of identity. Indeed, so the reader of this deep-going volume may conclude, it is within the realm of this *virtual umma* that many, especially young, British Muslims unfold their *multiple identities*. Which of them gains, on the generational average, the upper hand in attaining a modern Muslim Britishness that carries all the rights and duties of British society and its standards, remains to be seen.

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, Ph.D., German Orient Institute of Hamburg, conducts his research near Princeton NJ. He is author of Gold, Bankers and Diplomats: A History of the German Orient Bank 1906-46 and editor, most recently of Germany and the Middle East, 1871-1945.