

Islamic perspectives and social work competence: the British experience

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Discrimination towards 'race'/ethnicity has been overtaken by pejorative attitudes towards that of faith, which has become a huge contemporary issue in Britain (Weller *et al.*, 2001). This form of oppression is, however, targeted at specific rather than general faiths: notably Islam, which has come under political and public scrutiny in a way that is unparalleled in modern European history. Hardly a week has gone by in the British media without headlines and commentaries on issues that offer some significant reference to and often critique of British Muslim groups, often perceived as problematic and even threatening to civil order. Following in the aftermath of 9/11 and the violent example of the British born, extremist Muslim London bombers, anxieties and social tensions remain at a heightened level.

Many European countries are reflecting on the difficulties of the smooth assimilation of Muslim communities into their respective societies. The Netherlands stands as a case in point due to the outspoken Islamophobic views of the late politician Pim Fortuyn and the murder of the controversial film director Theo van Gogh in 2004. Furthermore, in the USA the implications and outcomes remain unclear in relation to the notorious torture issues that have come to light in the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, as a shameful consequence of the Bush-Blair alliance in Iraq.

Islamophobia has been a disturbing social problem in both the USA and Britain; nonetheless it is instructive and worrying to learn that American Muslims appear to be more assimilated into society than those in Britain (McAskill, 2007). One of the reasons for this striking difference has been attributed to the higher levels of religious adherence in the general American population. By contrast, many White Britons seem to incline towards North European secularism in that formal attendance in the State religion has declined over the years. Thus in Britain it is the case that religious commitment is more likely to be associated with certain minority ethnic groups, rather than with the dominant population.

Yet a more significant reason for the differences between Britain and the USA may be related to the higher socioeconomic status of American Muslims compared to their counterparts in Britain, where they constitute the most socially deprived faith group. Characterised by strong family formation, high rates of marriage and a larger household, the Muslim population in Britain has the youngest age structure with around 33% of the population under 16, and as high as 38% for Bangladeshi Muslims (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2008; TUC, 2005) Statistics additionally show that British Muslims are most likely to experience poor housing conditions, with 42 per cent of Muslim children living in overcrowded accommodation, compared to an overall figure of 12 per cent for the general population. While 35 per cent are growing up in households where there are no

adults in employment, compared with 17 per cent for all dependent children (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2008; Choudhury, 2005). Furthermore, Choudhury (2005) goes on to comment that almost one third of Muslims of working age have no qualifications, the highest proportion for any faith group, and 17.5 per cent of young people between the ages of 16 and 24 are unemployed compared to 7.9 per cent of Christians and 7.4 per cent of Hindus.

These levels of underprivilege obviously contribute to tensions in society. The triggering factor leading to the politicisation of British Muslims was the Salman Rushdie affair, where the publication of *The Satanic Verses* created a furore of intense aggravation and offence among British Muslims, over half of whom were born in the Indian subcontinent, the birth place of Sir Salman himself. This crisis was a particularly British phenomenon, for as David Waines comments, 'It has been observed that had ...*The Satanic Verses* been written, say, by a Moroccan Muslim and published in France, there would have been no controversy' (Waines, 2003: 259). Additional vociferous dissent came hard on the heels of the Gulf conflicts. These can and have been interpreted as an aggressive war upon Muslims as a faith group, despite the pointed reassurances of politicians to the contrary. A case in point relates to the alienated response of the Pakistani community in Manchester towards the first Gulf conflict, when Saddam Hussein was elevated in their view to an iconic Muslim hero battling in a righteous *jihad* against the Manichean and crusader force of George Bush and his British allies (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2008; Werbner, 1994).

The second Gulf conflict, which finally brought down Saddam Hussein, was an unpopular venture with many Britons from all ethnic groups from the first, and it could be argued that their fears were well founded given the lamentable and on-going consequences. However, the anger that was generally felt at the time (and which has yet to be dissipated in some quarters), fuelled additional grievances in Muslim communities in Britain that are very likely to have given added impetus to extremist interpretations of Islam among alienated citizens. Those who promulgate such views and who are intent on recruiting young British Muslim men combine a masculinist discourse, redolent with associated imagery, combined with religion (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2005). For example, Mohammed Siddique Khan, the eldest London bomber, recorded a video message to explain his reasons for the attack, and within this message it is clear that he was 'doing masculinity' ending his verbal justification with the comment, 'They [Islamic scholars] should stay at home and leave the job to *real men* – the true inheritors of the Prophet' (Spalek, 2007, p 204). In this vein, Archer (2003) argues that young Asian men may construct a powerful Islamic identity for themselves as a way of resisting the disempowered image that they perceived to be associated with the category 'Asian' (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, the overarching community of Islam (the *ummah*) may provide credible identification that supersedes national or ethnic identities. This may decrease the sense of alienation among Muslim youth in Britain, but in so doing does little to foster connection and commitment to British society and mainstream values, to the extent that there are voices questioning the entire notion of a Muslim identity that is also British.

Social work in Britain is still grappling with the notion of how to address spirituality and religion in its assessment processes and general intervention with service users. In this respect it is lagging behind disciplines such as psychiatry, which has made great strides to consider these aspects, together with the influences of culture and ethnicity. However, ethnic monitoring in the UK has been transformed with the faith question, where many individuals prefer to self-identify as 'Muslim' rather than use an ethnic identifier. This being so, it becomes an issue of increasing importance for British social workers to find ways to engage with spirituality and faith identities, over and above the basic acknowledgement of this form of diversity among service users. For example, in the Muslim world view faith is seamlessly integrated into the daily fabric of life and permeates its quotidian routines and rituals around the clock from birth to death. To try to apply a Cartesian-type dualism in which religious observance is separated from every day realities is utterly nonsensical to Muslims. The principles and values of Islam therefore permeate behaviour, interpersonal relationships, life styles, family issues and gender norms. This holism of principle and practice for Muslims can also be pivotal in relation to issues within the social work remit with regards to health needs, crisis situations, child welfare and the care of vulnerable adults. In consequence, it becomes all the more important that social work acquaints itself more fully with Islamic perspectives. These cannot be neatly and simply subsumed under a body of critique known as 'Black perspectives', which relates primarily to the Afro-Caribbean experience. Although there may be points of comparison, such as in terms of racism, there are significant dissimilarities as well. These lie, for instance, in the continued and complex legacy of slavery, which has a strong resonance for Black families and communities, but is most unlikely to hold similar connotations for Asian Muslims, or at least in the same way (Ashencaen Crabtree and Baba, 2001; Modood, 1997).

Islam is often associated with the oppression of women in the minds of the general public in the West. This view has been challenged by, among others, Muslim feminists, who seek to demonstrate that equality between the sexes is established under Islam (Afshar (1996; Moghissi, 1999). Yet, to speak in material rather than spiritual terms this is an equality that may be an unfamiliar one in the West. For under Islam equality exists in relation to the distinct and carefully prescribed roles for the sexes: for although these do not normally overlap, they are viewed as operating in harmony (Mansson McGinty, 2006; Stang Dahl, 1997). It is important not to resurrect some popular misconceptions regarding the role of women under Islam, yet at the same time it is certainly true that there are a number of contentious issues that British social workers must address in relation to gender in Muslim communities. These are rooted primarily in culture rather than religion, although the two are often conflated in the minds of critics and proponents of certain practices. Firstly, there is the issue of domestic violence. Within this broad category, two distinctive types are found within certain Muslim communities here. The first is the enforced marriages of young girls and women. Although precise numbers are unknown every year hundreds of South Asian Muslim school girls are taken out of the country back to Bangladesh or Pakistan for the purpose of marriage with an unknown suitor. This practice has been condemned by spiritual advisers in the British Muslim community, but nonetheless the Forced Marriage Unit, operating under the auspices of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, deals with around two hundred and fifty cases a year. Many

more, however, remain unreported and therefore uninvestigated (Ashencaen Crabtree *et al.*, 2008).

Even more worrying than enforced marriage are murders which fall under the category of the so-called 'honour killings'. This is where a woman is viewed as having brought shame on the family honour (the *izzat*) by having made some culturally informed transgression, which is usually considered innocuous or normal in the wider society. This was typified by the recent appalling case of Banaz Mahmud, a twenty-year-old Kurdish woman whose body was found in a suitcase having been strangled by her father and uncle. Her crime was to fall in love with a Kurdish Muslim boyfriend who was not from the same village.

Finally, a third major concern lies in relation to female genital mutilation (FGM). Once again, although this is not specifically demanded under Islam (and is inflicted on non-Muslim females as well in some places), it is practised in many Muslim countries, and is often thought to be religiously mandated. The World Health Organization has estimated that FGM has been practised on between 100 and 140 million girls and women worldwide (WHO, 2008). In Britain alone it is estimated that despite specific legislation in place to protect children from FGM there are likely to be over 6,000 girls at risk every year (Forward, 2002). Unlike France there have been no prosecutions of parents of children subjected to FGM in Britain, where it appears that it is considered to be problem best tackled through preventative means. However, it is likely to be social workers at the vanguard of such strategies and consequently it is of concern that there is so little mention of FGM in social work literature devoted to child welfare, as well as diversity issues. Yet, this is merely a reflection of the urgent need for British social work to more fully comprehend the valuable perspectives Islam can bring to the profession, in order to work more effectively with individuals and families with knowledge, respect and empathy.

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