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# Religious media as a cultural discourse: The views of the Arab diaspora in London

## Introduction

This chapter aims to contribute to the debate surrounding media as a cultural practice, focusing on Islamic channels and how they might contribute to enforcing the cultural identity of a selected sample of Arab diaspora in London. The term diaspora here is not a term that can be applied to any dispersed population who may be bound by the same ethnic identity. Rather, diaspora can denote a process that binds several communities around the world who engage in building an imagined community based on their ethnic or religious identity (see e.g. Brubaker 2005; Cohen 1997). This process of building a certain diasporan identity is communicated through debates about the characteristics of this identity and what it means for these communities across the world. Diaspora can be defined as ‘any minority community within a multi-ethnic polity’ and this community seeks ‘to reproduce inter-generationally a sense of identification within this group...Diaspora suggests a commitment to maintaining a sense of roots that lie outside of the country where one lives’ (Cheng and Katz 1998:72). Thus, diaspora is usually seen to rest on two coordinates: homeland orientation and boundary maintenance (Brubaker 2005). Muslim communities provide a good case in point in analysing diaspora communities of Muslims scattered all over the world, who are bound by one religious identity.

Media here plays a crucial role in articulating this identity through the subjective narratives of members of these communities. In these narratives, subjects engage in the process of (re-)identifying their own cultural boundaries vis-à-vis other cultural groups in their host societies (see e.g. Hall 1990). In so doing, they enforce a collective identity with their homelands by invoking memories of common history and geography in their cultural practices, such as consumption of ethnic and transnational media. Such media can indeed provide alternatives to mainstream media (see e.g. Ahmed 2003) while facilitating new venues to discuss identity and belonging. For instance, Chong examines the relation between religion and ethnic identity and argues that this relationship has not always been clear; religion can be ancillary to ethnic identity while serving ethical and legitimating functions (1998: 264–265). In addition, recent scholarly analyses of the proliferation of Islamic media, whether on satellite or digital media, such

as Salvatore and Eickelman (2006) and Eickelman (1999), argue that the present times witness a new Islamic public sphere characterised by its open debates through the use of new media including the Internet. In particular, Salvatore and Eickelman define the Islamic public sphere as ‘public Islam,’ where Muslims scholars and intellectuals can engage in open debates and discussions about issues of common interest (2006). Indeed, the Internet technology has contributed to enforcing this conceptualisation of Muslim public sphere, particularly on the Internet. Gary Bunt, for instance describes this space as digital *umma*, referring on particular to the Muslim community debate online (2000: 17). Although this openness should reflect the egalitarian status of participants in this dialogue whose aim is to seek consensus on what is good for the whole *umma* [nation], it is by no means given that the Habermasian (western) concepts of dialogue and consensus, let alone common good, can be applied wholesale on the diverse Muslim populations spread across several continents around the world. These concepts are rather fluid and dynamic, i.e. what can be characterised as ‘common good’ may change through times and continuous debates (El-Nawway & Khamis 2010: 233). Peter Mandaville also argues that the Muslim *umma* has emerged as a re-imagined community where members engage in discussion through mediated communication across geographical boundaries. But he also argues that ‘we need to understand these media as spaces of communication in which the identity, meaning and boundaries of diasporic community are continually constructed, debated and reimagined’ (Mandaville 2001: 169).

Indeed, the analysis of the communication, facilitated by this technology, can also reveal the diverse needs and demands of these audiences. For instance, it is by no means given that Arab Muslim audiences in the diaspora share the same concerns, problems and demands of Arab Muslims within the Arab region, yet recent scholarship does not give enough scrutiny to such comparative approaches analysing the voices and topics in this virtual sphere. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate this difference through an exploratory study among a selected sample of young Arabs in London by focusing on their views about religious programming.

In the following, I argue that Arab-Muslim communities in London constitute unique diasporan communities that seek to foreground their multicultural identity, which serves a two-fold role: it helps enforce virtual boundaries between those Arabs and other ethnic Muslim communities in London while accentuating the difference between their unique situational contexts (in Britain) vis-à-vis other Arabs within the Arab region.

In line with Hoover (2006), I argue that media here constitute spaces of cultural and social practices integrated in the cultural discourse, and as such, cultural identity is not just a variable separate from religion. Instead, cultural identity is the sum of the interaction between media and religion. Because Islam as a religion is a mediated practice (see e.g. Galal 2006), it is important to analyse religious identity in relation to the unique surrounding social and cultural context of the audience. I begin by defining the concept of audiences, before I discuss this case study.

### **Diaspora audiences joining the *umma***

Audience as a word denotes a collective mass of receivers, although it is more fruitful to acknowledge the diversity and fragmentation of media audiences (McQuail 1997). Several scholars (e.g. Moores 1993) enforce the latter allusion, arguing for analysing audiences in the plural based on the diversity of their socio-cultural positioning. In his overview of audience studies, Webster divides this body of literature into three models according to the definition of audience, namely audience as mass, as outcome and as agent (1998). Seeing audience as mass is more about patterns of consumption than the interpretation of this particular consumption. Clearly, such a model undermines the heterogeneity of audiences, not to mention its connotation of audiences' passivity. The second model sees audience as an outcome and is concerned with the effect of media on people, while the third model scrutinises people's use of media and how they freely interpret media texts.

There is also a range of studies that cannot be neatly categorised in these three models and are instead based on a creative combination of these models. Other scholars, however, problematize the simple definition of media, including diaspora, as addressing mass audiences across different geographical spaces. For instance, Abercrombie and Longhurst suggest the concept of 'diffused' audiences to denote the new category of audiences who no longer share a 'mass' experience consumed in domestic surroundings, e.g. living rooms (1998). Rather, audiences are now likely to consume media in an individual setting such as personal computers, and hence form their own personal experience as media consumers, in contrast to mass audiences who are exposed to a certain medium such as printed newspapers. Couldry develops this argument by suggesting that audiences can now be characterised as "extended audiences" who draw on various media including speech and thought where boundaries are rather blurred between media and audiences (2005). Here, Muslim Arab communities in Britain are a case in point: they arrive in European cities only to find themselves grouped with other

ethnic groups into Muslim communities, which forms a ‘virtual reality’ which ‘exists above all in the minds of western politicians, ‘experts’ and journalists ... [although] no one would consider immigrants to western Europe from two strict Catholic countries such as Poland and the Philippines as belonging to a single ‘Christian community’” (Bechir and Saghieh 2005). Also, Nagel and Staeheli’s study among selected groups of Arab youths in Britain shows a significant contradiction: while the youth stress that religion is important for their identity, they reject the priori British categorisation of them as ‘British Muslims’ thereby equating them with other Muslim communities such as the Asian. For them, such categorisation is a politicized classification that glosses over inherent cultural and ethnic differences. And while they work hard on “validating” their own Arab identity, they end up validating Islam as well in an attempt to educate the British society about Islam (Nagel and Staeheli 2009: 6–9).

## Arabs in London

There are large groups of Arab and Arabic-speaking communities living in the UK and different countries across the European Union. The word ‘Arab’ as an ethnic classification usually refers to residents whose country of birth is an Arab State (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestinian Territories, Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Bahrain and Iraq). Two other countries, however, namely Mauritania and Somalia, and particularly the latter, are sometimes classified as Arab states due to the intelligibility of Arabic in these countries. It is also worth mentioning that Somalia and Mauritania have been members in the Arab League since the 1970s.

According to the 2011 census in the UK, the number of Arabs living in the UK is estimated to constitute approximately 0.5% of the total population, with the largest concentration in London, where 1.5% of all inhabitants come from an Arab background. Yet, these are not exact figures that reflect the actual number of the Arab community in the UK, and this is because the ethnicity census usually does not classify all ethnic groups, which makes the Arabs more inclined to choose between *White*, *Black* or *Others* (Georgiou 2002). For instance, according to the UK national statistics, one in ten Muslims in the UK is classified under the *White* ethnic group, e.g. those from Turkey, Cyprus and North Africa. Although Britain dominated large parts of the Arab world from the nineteenth century until the independence of these states in the mid twentieth century, the Arab world was not considered part of the British Commonwealth and thus Arabs did not have the right to move to Britain in the same way Algerians were able to move

to France under the French rule (Nagel 2001: 387). Instead, Arabs migrated to Britain for purposes of work, trade and education. Still, their status in Britain remains that of 'foreign' nationals rather than an integrated minority (*ibid.*). The Arab influx to Britain can be dated back to the 1950s when immigrants came typically from Egypt and Algeria. Palestinians, Somalis and Lebanese have also increased in number since 1989 (Georgiou 2002). The oldest Arab communities are the Yemenis in Cardiff and the Syrians in Manchester. Increasing trade, moreover, attracted Yemeni and Somali labourers, in particular, to the British cities of Cardiff and Liverpool.

In addition, there are a large number of Arabian Gulf nationals who consider London an important business site. Indeed, London has become an international centre of Arabian Gulf enterprises. Particularly since the mid 1970s with the oil boom in the Arabian Gulf, nationals from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) counties (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) have chosen London both as a tourist destination but also more importantly as a place for investment. There are several reasons for this: the historic link between the Arabian Gulf and Britain, the importance of the English language to the labour market in the GCC countries, the perception of the UK as a friend and ally to Arab states, the position of the UK as a link between Europe and the USA, and the increasing number of Arab immigrants in the UK (Salamandra 2002).

The extent of Arab communities' integration in British society differs across age and socio-economic groups. For instance, Caroline Nagel (2002) provides a comprehensive study among Arab communities<sup>1</sup> in London, dividing them into three types. The first type is what she called 'middle class negotiators,' who seek to show their assimilation to mainstream culture while in public spaces but nurture their distinct Arab identity in private spaces. In so doing, they accommodate for the mainstream construction of a British or English identity while negotiating their group identities as Arab, English and ethnic (*ibid.*: 274).

The second type is referred to as Arab multiculturalists, who are mainly first-generation Arabs, some of whom have moved to Britain as refugees. They generally belong to a lower-income group than the middle class negotiators. Unlike the latter group, Arab multiculturalists frame their ethnic identity within the discourse of multiculturalism, in an attempt to assert their Arabness as a visible minority group. In so doing, they sustain an identity 'situated in the political

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1 It is worth noting that Nagel's study was aimed at Arab activists, but I find her categorization also relevant to the present study.

context of the host society' while accentuating their cultural differences vis-à-vis white mainstream groups (ibid.: 274).

The third group is coined 'young cosmopolitans,' a group of Arabs who share the socio-economic status of the middle-class negotiators and enjoy a comfortable socio-economic background. They are also generally mobile in terms of education and employment. Although this particular group does not reject their Arab identity, they tend to distance themselves from Arab networks, preferring not to mingle with other Arab groups. In so doing, they do not seek to assert an English mainstream identity, as is the case with middle-class negotiators, because they still share the feeling of being generally excluded from mainstream. Instead, this group seeks to identify themselves as cosmopolitans or citizens of the world, with a home base in London.

These communities have ample opportunities to remain connected with their homelands thanks to the technological leap that facilitated the use of Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) in the transmission of satellite channels. Arab communities have now the choice of a few hundred free channels, not to mention subscription channels. One British-Iraqi expressed contentment with this new choice, saying:

We used to watch only BBC TV channels. There was a scarcity in news. We got news about the Arab World by listening to Arab radio stations on short waves, [which] did not have a good reputation, except the Arabic service in the BBC World Service. We used to stay late in the night to listen to this channel. (Ben Moussa 2004)

There are also a few studies about Arab diasporas and their media consumption, primarily with news. For instance, Miladi provides an audience analysis among selected Arabs in Britain focusing on their viewership of *al-Jazeera* Arabic in comparison with the *BBC* and *CNN*. His main conclusion is that Arabic-speaking viewers turned to *al-Jazeera* after 11 September, because they found it more credible (2006). Similarly, Matar considers the mediation of the events of 11 September in UK and Arab news media with focus on the Palestinians in Britain, as an ethno-national minority and diaspora (2006). Clearly, such analyses tend to see Arab diasporan communities as members of a global Arab public sphere due to their political interest in Arab news and hence their solidarity with the Arab nations. Although this literature acknowledges the complexity of generalising the identities of these communities, it is yet to be acknowledged that diaspora indeed "is constituted as much in *difference and division* as it in *commonality and solidarity*" (Anthias 1998: 564, emphasis in original). In other words, Arab transnational television here represents a new site for resistance, contestation and negotiation of their identities as diaspora Arabs rather than unquestionably

accepting the subject positions offered on TV. For instance, Arab communities in London are diverse in terms of their nationalities, religious orientations, religious and cultural practices and degree of integration in the British society; their interpretations of religious programmes are manifold rather than uniform.

In the following sections, I present an exploratory study into these communities, focusing on a small sample of young Arab-British students (between 20–36 years old) who study at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in London. The overall aim is to explore how their views of religious media may differ from the views of their counterparts within the Arab region.

### **Analysing narrative**

The following analysis is based on ten interviews with young Arab university students in London. I have chosen the interview method based on my belief that we construct the world through stories and verbal interaction. As such, these interviews were analysed as providing practical insights into the interviewees' perception of religious media and the way they understand, explain, and organize experiences (Cortazzi 1993). Thus, interviews can be analysed as discursive acts (Mishler 1986) in which the interviewer and interviewee are engaged in creating the narrative framework (Riessman 2001).

The following sections are based on the analysis of collected interviews, where each interviewee was encouraged to elaborate as to how they perceive themselves as Arab and Muslim in Britain. I collected these narratives through semi-structured interviews with these ten young Arabs, relying on the snowball technique, where one contact leads to another. All interviews were conducted in Arabic and transcribed. The analysis is based on thematic coding of the interviews based on the research questions. Because the sample is rather small, I do not aim to generalize any themes here, but instead, I identify issues of interest for future studies. Interviews were analysed as samples of personal narrative, and thus a tool to understand people's perspectives and perceptions (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). As people use narratives to tell about their lives, they also use and draw on such narratives to make sense of the world as they perceive and experience it, or as Clandinin and Connelly put it, 'Stories are the closest we can come to experience as we and others tell our experiences... is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones' (Clandinin and Connelly 1994: 415). The following sections build on my informants' narratives and views of religious programming.

The interviews were conducted between January and April 2011<sup>2</sup>, with ten students: three of Iraqi origin, five of Egyptian origin, one Saudi citizen and one Jordanian citizen. The latter two informants did not have British citizenship, while the remaining interviewees were British citizens either by birth or naturalisation. All informants were at that time enrolled in different universities in London, either as undergraduate or postgraduate students. In terms of age, they were all between 20 and 25 years old, except the two non-UK citizens who were postgraduate students aged between 35 and 36. Although the sample is by no means representative of the Arab populations (or youths) in London, it can still serve as an illustrative case study of this group's sense of belonging to a virtual Islamic public sphere.

### Scrutinizing religious media content

The past decade has seen an increase in the number of Islamic satellite channels and an equal increase in the number of young Muslim preachers using such channels to promote a moderate vision of Islam in an upbeat preaching style. These new talk shows mark a significant break from the old style preachers, who cited the holy Koran in white robes and preached in eloquent, classical Arabic while warning his audiences of the punishment in hell if they do not live by the Koranic texts. Two prominent preachers have claimed a vast audience inside and outside the region: Amr Khaled and Mo'ez Mas'oud.

Amr Khaled, 48 years old, was dubbed by the *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. His message is of tolerance and love, or as he put it in one of his early lectures, 'It would break your heart to know how much God loves you. No matter how sinful you are, God will forgive all if you repent. Isn't it time to give up your sins?' (quoted in Shahine 2002). Moez Masoud, 33 years old, also comes from an affluent background and is conversant in English and life in Europe. His shows centre on messages of love and compassion to others including homosexuals and non-Muslims (Sullivan 2007).

When I asked my informants whether they watch talk shows such as those hosted by Khaled or Mas'oud, they said that their parents usually follow religious broadcasting, particularly *Iqraa* channel, whose content was deemed as rather 'irrelevant' to their particular situation as Arabs in London. Mahdi (m, 23), for

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2 Although the Arab uprisings broke up during that time, I chose not to make those events the main topic of the interviews. Suffice to say here that the interviewees, particularly those with Egyptian background, expressed their pride in the uprising and the fact that Egyptian youths were credited for it.

instance, said that he would rather spend his time attending to his university lectures than watching this kind of programmes. He would also rather follow the Arab news such as *al-Jazeera*, *BBC Arabic* and *al-Arabiya* than religious channels. For many of my informants, religious channels are mostly relevant during Ramadan when families stress the importance of fasting and prayers. When asked about Amr Khaled's programmes in particular, the majority of my informants expressed disengagement with these programmes and rather disengagement with a preacher like Amr Khaled. Amani (f, 21) for instance, said that Amr Khaled's presentation style is rather undemotivating for her to follow him:

Amr Khaled shouts a lot, and this can scare young people like me...his talk about the torment of the grave is also scary...I want [programmes that]...tell young people about the good things in Islam...that we are all going to paradise...they [youths] need to know God can help them be good.

Tariq (m, 23) reported that he sometimes finds the language of such programmes too difficult to understand, especially when the preachers cite references to Koran and Hadith that he did not learn by heart. He would rather have programmes in English targeting people like him in diaspora communities. Nonetheless, an English-speaking channel like Islam TV, broadcast from London, is not an attractive option, as he affiliates it with the 'Asian Muslims.' Although his parents are fervent followers of Amr Khaled's programmes, Tariq thinks that this preaching 'does not concern [him].' Also, Marwa (f, 25), agreed that Islam TV is not a viable option although her family tunes into it in Ramadan just to know the time of the evening 'adaan' [call for prayer].

Likewise, Amani (f, 21) said that her parents regularly watch Amr Khaled's programmes and they would urge her to watch with them, especially when there is an episode about family in Islam:

I watch with them whenever there is a preach about family...it's boring stuff for me...and I'd usually tell them that I'd watch it online later...I don't know why I was supposed to watch this...I knew all of this stuff already...I know what is right and wrong.

She also stated that she finds this type of programming rather irrelevant for young women like her who live in different cultural context:

They say things that are not very relevant for my life here...for example they always say that women should wear an 'Abaya-like dress...maybe this is relevant in Egypt but not here in London...I could wear a top and jeans here [in London], and I'd still look decent and no one would look at me...in some programmes, people talk about their own personal problems and ask for fatwa, but I cannot see how relevant these fatwas are to my life here.

Moreover, Amani wishes there were programmes for people of her age; for her, Amr Khaled and other similar preachers address people in their 30s and older. Yasmine (f, 20) shared this view and recalled a programme that used to be broadcast on *MBC* (The Middle East Broadcasting Center), entitled *Yalla ya Shabab*, co-hosted the Egyptian actor Ahmed al-Fishawi with a group of young people:

I liked Fishawi's programme...I felt like I learned something out of it...but I do not like Amr Khaled...his language is hard...and I do not like his style...why should I listen to someone on such channels everyday for a whole hour...I already know the difference between right and wrong...I do not know why my parents ever watch this boring stuff.

Similarly, Hany (m, 21) was not attracted to preachers like Amr Khaled but reported seeking out younger generations such as Mustafa Husny, who present programmes on the Islamic channel *Iqraa* TV targeting young audiences. If given the chance, Hany said he would like to revamp those religious channels' websites and make them more informative for youths in the diaspora. Marwa (f, 25) also saw such religious channels as a political tool: 'I think such channels have political agendas and they target more people inside the region.'

On the other hand, the older students expressed more critical views about such religious media. For instance, Mohamed (m, 36) believed that some of these Islamic talk shows are moulded after Christian televangelists' programmes, particularly in matters related to personal development and positive thinking. But preachers like Amr Khaled, according to Mohamed, 'jump on the moral bandwagon of religion rather than religion itself' rather than creating a new programme concept that teaches Islam in relation to 'western' concepts such as socialism, racism and tolerance.

Another older student, Najat (f, 36) described the real problem in religious programming as the fact that audiences tend to nearly 'sanctify' the preachers on TV:

In Saudi Arabia, life is based on religion...one of my friends there holds a degree in Finance but does not want to work in a bank because she heard a fatwa that says it'd be haram for a Muslim to work in a bank....the problem is that those preachers have become experts in everything in life...and the audiences almost sanctify them...but I think they [preachers] shouldn't be given more than they deserve...people should ask them about religion only...not economy, banking or politics.

Indeed, she echoes the Islam scholar Ahmed Ben Baz' arguments, whose recent statement to *al-Arabiya's* flagship programme *Ida'aat* [Spotlights] made headlines in the Kingdom. Ben Baz said that the Islamic world need more intellectuals than fatwa-issuers, and that right and wrong are clear in Islam, but

audiences tend to ask about everything in life, and television preachers may take advantage of this to promote themselves in fatwa-programmes (*Ida'at*, episode aired on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2010 on *al-Arabiya*). This critique of religious channels and preachers should be seen in contrast to the views of other youths within the Arab region. For instance, the latter group feels that television evangelists like Amr Khaled and Tarek Swidan address their particular issues and sees them as figures that 'are knowledgeable and humble...[and] would like to help heal the society' (Karam 2007: 156). This cohort of youths within the region sees these programmes as having a positive influence on their lives. As expressed by an 18-year old Emirati man, 'some religious programmes helped me change some of my bad habits' (ibid.).

In summary, this cohort negotiates and (re-)interprets the teachings of Islam to suite their particular demands and circumstances; this is in line with previous studies (e.g. Mandaville 2001: 107). This cohort of young people in London is critical of the linear communication in preaching styles and they offer up a new vision for new programmes directed at young diaspora communities, who long for more engaging programming when compared to youths residing in the Arab region.

## Muslim identity as a tool for resistance

For Arab Muslims in Britain, it is rather difficult to strongly affiliate with existing Muslim networks and societies. The main reason for this is the tendency to conflate Muslims with 'Asian Muslims,' rather than seeing the nuances and diversity of Muslim communities in the UK (Nagel 2009: 14). In fact, Arab Muslims feel strongly that ethnic differences distinguish them from Asian Muslims, particularly Pakistanis, in terms of both lifestyle and faith practices. As a Yemeni-British young man put it, 'I'm not entirely sure I believe in what they [Asian Muslims] do. Every time I have a chance to talk to them about what they do, the response I get is not convincing to me. But I am a Muslim, a Yemeni, an Arab, and I associate myself with that' (quoted in Nagel 2009: 14–15).

For one of my informants, Mahdi (m, 23), for instance, being Muslim was not a criterion to use when it comes to choosing friends. He preferred to define himself as 'conservative' rather than Muslim, thereby stressing the moral aspect of his identity. When he first moved to London as a young boy, it was important for his family to surround him with Iraqi and Arab-Muslim children, but this changed as he grew up and moved out to live near his campus. For him, religion is the sum of moral values that can guide his life, such as not drinking alcohol or indulging in a relationship out of the wedlock. The ethnic identity of Mahdi as an Iraqi is

by far more pronounced in his life, his future plans, for example, include raising his own children as Iraqis and teaching them the Arabic language.

For other young people, being Muslim was a fact they sought to hide rather than proudly boast about. For instance, Tariq (m, 23) remembered how he was teased during primary and secondary school by other children whose curiosity about Islam added to Tariq's pressures: 'for instance, they would ask me why I didn't eat pork, and I felt like I had to answer on behalf of all Muslims.'

It is especially after the events of 11 September that young people like Tariq felt the pressures of being both Arabs and Muslims. This view was shared by Yasmine (f, 20) who lived with her family in Kent county where they had very few Arab neighbours:

I did not tell anyone at school that I was Muslim...because I felt other pupils were surprised in the RE classes every time the teacher explained something about Islam, and they even said negative things...they also asked me strange things... like if those fundamentalists were demented...so I was not proud of my background... as I am now. It started to change in the high school where there were girls from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds.

When Tariq and Yasmine entered the university, they found new friends of similar ethnic backgrounds and it was particularly then that they felt proud of their identity as Egyptians and Muslims. Both of them identify themselves as Muslims even if they do not pray or fast on a regular basis: 'I do not go to mosques, but I still feel Muslim...I know what is right and wrong,' said Yasmine. For them, religion is more about morals and a 'good lifestyle' in which they would not drink alcohol and refrain from promiscuity. Moreover, Tariq proudly recounted of his intention to raise his children as 'Egyptian Muslims' lest they would be 'too westernised.'

Indeed, both Tariq and Yasmine do not deny their British identity, preferring to highlight a multicultural view that reconciles their Egyptian Muslim roots with their British/Western life. Embracing both British and Egyptian/Muslim identities equips them with this strong sense of ethics and virtue and confidence in understanding both Western and Muslim values.

Both male and female informants confirm their gender differences, which have marked them since childhood and which are now more obvious in terms of the degree of freedom allowed by their parents. Both Yasmine and Amany (both of Egyptian origin, aged 20), for instance, complained that their brothers seem to enjoy more freedom than they do. Their brothers could club or party late into the night, while their sisters could not claim the same right. Parents also do not pressure the boys to show religiosity in the same way they do with the girls.

For instance, Yasmine said, 'I used to tell my friends that I'd pray in front of my mum so she could let me go out with them,' thereby using religious practices as a means to gain her parents' trust. Although her parents took a decision to live in a 'non-Arab' neighbourhood, they are still cautious about their social image as a conservative family, which is why Yasmine's mum restricts Yasmine's outings: 'I tried to explain to my mum that the [British] neighbours would be more surprised if I didn't leave the house than if they see me going out with my friends.'

Amany also admitted to frequently arguing with her parents because they overlook her brother's negligence of his religious duties outside the house: 'my brother only prays when he is at home... but when he's out of the house, you can't tell that he is Egyptian at all.' While Yasmine had not gone so far as to adopt the hijab (headscarf) in order to gain her family's trust, Amany adopted the headscarf at the age of 14, much to the surprise of her school mates, who made rather sarcastic remarks that expressed they believed she was forced by her parents to wear the veil. Amany insisted that she was not forced to wear it to follow her mother's example, but she spoke about her extended family in Egypt and how proud they are of her for wearing the hijab.

Moreover, Amany sees Islam as 'part of her ethnic identity':

Islam is important for my family to understand our cultures and ethics, what is haram and halal [wrong and right] not to stay out the night, girls should not do things, so they favoured me mixing with other Muslim girls. Although they allowed my brother to mix with English boys and come late at night, and this is a source of dispute between me and them.

She is proud of her Egyptian relatives' praise, which for her symbolises her success in embracing British and Egyptian Muslim values. In so doing, she illustrates successful multiculturalism that combines British values and education with the traditional veil.

Macleod's study in Egypt showed that Muslim women in the lower middle classes may adopt the hijab for economic and cultural reasons rather than for religious or political motivations (1991). For instance, wearing the hijab may mean that women spend less on doing their hair or buying fashionable clothes. For others, it can mean avoiding sexual harassment in public spaces. Thus, the meaning Muslim women attach to the hijab, or any religious practice for that matter, is a multifaceted act resulting from each woman's particular social and cultural surroundings. Macleod also argues that these women's choices regarding adopting the hijab indicate their active negotiations of rigid dichotomies such as religious and cultural, or public and private. Likewise, Arab-Muslim women in London may engage in similar negotiations and challenges. Arab-British women

may choose the hijab as a symbol of their rebellion or disagreement with western (foreign) policies. In this case, the veil can be a decision that can be taken rather abruptly to express this disagreement, e.g. following news about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Nagel and Staeheli 2009: 12–13), or it can be an interactive tool of political commentary (Tarlo 2010: 41).

In summary, this cohort has strong perception of prejudice in London, due to their ethnic identity as Arabs particularly in the post 9/11 era. This awareness began early in primary and secondary school, but seems to have shifted during their university years partly because of the multicultural nature of London universities and partly because they began to surround themselves with likeminded young Arabs. Nonetheless, this perception confirms their feeling of being noticeably distinct from native (white) Brits – hence their passionate plan to pass on the Arabic language and Islamic teachings to their children.

### **Religion as cultural practice**

For my informants, being Muslim is not only a religious matter but also, or more importantly, a cultural issue. They define their religious identity through their national identity and in so doing conflate the religious with the cultural practices and values. Some of them, however, are aware of the distinction between religious and cultural practices, such as Mahdi, who deliberately avoid social gatherings with Arab youths who appear to be ‘very religious’ as he called them:

I don't want [them] to tell me I should pray and fast...they have to realise that other Muslims and non-Muslims are also fine people...they are like the old generation who kept telling us that we ‘the best nation to have been raised up for humankind.’

Mahdi prefers to cling to a multicultural identity to define himself and he also would rather call himself conservative than religious referring to his respect of Iraqi values and traditions, not necessarily of the Koran and Hadith. He spoke fervently about the need to adopt a sense of multiculturalism in London that does not favour certain religions or racial backgrounds but sees diversity as enriching.

By seeing religion as part of their ethnic identity, my informants clearly distinguish themselves from other Muslim youths in London, such as Asian Muslims, or as Mohamed put it:

We do not belong to the same tribe or culture, we share religion but it is not enough to classify us as one group...I would rather identify myself as Arab...they [Asian Muslims] are different...even their way of practising Islam is quite different from the Arabs.

Moreover, Mohamed (m, 35) equated religion with ethics:

Religion teaches me about ethics...like fasting to feel with the poor....it can relieve you from depression...it can make you live at peace...give you good ethical standards...so we shouldn't lie or cheat.

Likewise, Yasmine does not necessarily pray five times a day or fast all Ramadan, but she still described herself as a practising Muslim because she knows the 'basics':

I know the basics, like we should not drink wine, no sex out of wedlock and so on, so I don't need someone [Amr Khaled] to tell me how to become Muslim.

Also, Marwa (f, 25) reported praying daily and fasting during Ramadan, but she does not wear the veil and she does not like attending Shiite gatherings. She also deliberately chooses not to mingle with other Iraqi girls, especially those who wear the veil just to make their parents happy:

I think I am responsible girl and this proves my religiosity more than wearing the veil. I know what's right from wrong.... they [Iraqi veiled girls] make sarcastic comments if I tell them that I'm going home early...they'd sarcastically say, 'really? Are you going home or somewhere else?' if I wore the veil, they'd not tell me this stuff.

Thus, Marwa, like Yasmine and Mahdi, prefers to cling to a multicultural identity to justify her unease in mixing with other Arab nationals or with other religious factions, e.g. Sunni Iraqis.

For Hany (m, 23), religion is important 'to go to paradise', as if it is a criterion one needs to fulfil rather than an integral part of his identity. Yet, he noticed that many of his peers exaggerate their religious practices compared to Muslim youths in his native Egypt; for instance, he recalled one of his friends who changed his lifestyle rather radically by praying daily and refusing to shake hands with girls or join social gatherings. For Hany, this is because of the parents' failure to specify his friend's ethnic and national identity at fairly young age. A similar example was cited by Mohamed (m, 35):

[A] talented man...a graduate of the best universities in the world...but suddenly he quit his job and left for Egypt to learn Arabic and was very angry with his parents that they did not teach him when he was a child.

The moral here is that language and ties to homeland are important ingredients for a balanced life in the diaspora. And it was perhaps therefore that all my informants stressed the importance of learning Arabic and passing it on to their children. Moreover, Marwa (f, 25) saw the problem with rigid religiosity to a

greater degree in the second generation, who never really grew up in an Arab country:

[Y]oung women here who have not lived in Iraq tend to overdo it...they wanted to make a point [by wearing the veil] or to prove something, but I lived in Iraq and I know it was not like this.

Thus, this cohort conflates their Muslim identity with their ethnicity in that they see in Islam a set of core values bound to their ethnic origin, e.g. abstaining from alcohol or having sex out of wedlock. This is so even if they could not express deep knowledge about Islam beyond 'the basics' of praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan. Clinging to their religious identity may be a defensive response to feeling different (as non-white) in a society that may politicise Muslims, regardless of their ethnicity (Nagel 2002). As such, the religious identity can appeal to this generation as a source of support and group empowerment. On the other hand, they cling to a multicultural identity in situations where they need to justify their unease with other Arab nationals.

## Conclusion

In summary, religious channels may contribute to the reproduction of the cultural identity of the second generation Arabs in London. This process also supports the transmission of Arab-Islamic values through the identification with Arab-Islamic morality and views. The above case study also illustrates the heterogeneity of the Islamic views, as shown in the need of some audiences to distinguish themselves from other Muslim communities in London, such as the Asian communities.

Indeed, Arab communities may see their ethnicity as a tool to distinguish them from other Muslim communities in the diaspora, such as Asian Muslims in Britain. Nonetheless, it is equally important to see Arab communities as a complex cohort characterised by their differences rather than similarities, which speaks to the difficulty of grouping them under one single community or equating them with youths in the Arab region or even with youths in other European societies. The fact that they share the same ethnic attribution is not in itself a proof of any similarity (Anthias 1998: 565). For instance, Lewis illustrates this point in her examination of the role of religion and nation in diasporic imagination. Her study argues that Iraq Sunni women in Toronto prefer to maintain strong class and national ties, thereby overshadowing ties to other Muslim and Arab communities within Toronto (2008).

Moreover, this cohort of youths has been made more aware of their religious identity after the events of 11 September, and they conflate it with their ethnic identity as a tool to demarcate the differences between them and other British Muslims (e.g. Asians). In addition, watching religious programming makes this cohort aware of the fissure within Arab communities inside the Arab Region and the generational differences between this cohort and their parents.

Future studies could investigate the degree of religiosity, which seems to vary among young Arabs, ranging from a “westernised” life-style to very conservative Muslim practices. Could religious media, in any format, play a role in nurturing either extreme? Recent scholarship on religious media tends to highlight the role of such media as a source of information about Islam, but it would be also fruitful to consider the role of other media genres such as TV soap operas [musalsalat] as equally viable sources of such information. There is still place for more studies to unearth the subtle differences within the multiple layers of the Muslim public sphere.

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