

British-Arab perspectives on religion, politics, and ‘the public’

Caroline R. Nagel, Loughborough University

Lynn A. Staeheli, University of Edinburgh

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Introduction

In October of 2006, a public debate erupted in Britain over comments made by Labour MP Jack Straw about his veiled Muslim female constituents. Straw stated in an interview that he had asked women to remove their face coverings when speaking to him in order to enhance communication between them. Denying any objection to a simple headscarf, Straw stated that he felt uncomfortable speaking to someone he could not see, reasoning that covering the face defeated the purpose of meeting in person rather than over the telephone or email. Moreover, he urged his veiled constituents to consider the consequences their religious garb had in terms of creating 'parallel communities' and feelings of 'separateness'. 'Communities', Straw argued, are 'bound together partly by informal chance relations between strangers, people acknowledging each other in the street, being able to pass the time of day, sharing just experiences in the street, and that is just made more difficult if people are wearing a veil...' (BBC, 2006). The veil, Straw suggested in his comments, is not simply another form of difference to be encountered in the everyday life of communities, but rather, an impediment to shared experience.

Shortly after the Straw episode, a case emerged in which a young Muslim teacher was suspended from her job for refusing to remove her face covering. The case was brought to court amidst a chorus of commentaries by Labour ministers about the dangers of religious extremism, the oppression of Muslim women, and the threat to social harmony posed by over-zealous Muslims. This sudden preoccupation with Muslim women's headwear seems curiously out of place in Britain, where, in contrast to France, headscarves have not generated a great deal of controversy. But, at the same time, these recent incidents reflect misgivings about the integration of the country's Muslim communities, who are mainly of South Asian origin, that have been building since the Rushdie Affair in 1989. The outbreak of violence in the summer of 2001 between Asian and white youths in three northern towns, the bombing of the London underground in 2005, and the foiling of a plot to blow up passenger jets in 2006, have led to expressions of concern by public officials about the 'self-segregation' of British Muslims and their seeming unwillingness to adapt to mainstream British life. These concerns have coalesced in a discourse of social cohesion, which places the onus of integration on (Muslim)

minorities, and which signals the marginalization of public discourses of multiculturalism (Back, et al, 2002; Lewis and Neal, 2005; Yuval-Davis, et al, 2005).

British Muslims have had remarkably little say in constructing their own public identity in the midst of these debates, in part because of the strength and momentum of negative stereotypes, and in part because of the government's reliance on a small number of voices to represent the entire Muslim 'community' (Gilliat-Ray, 2004). Where British Muslims *have* been given a voice, their differences in political views and social attitudes, and indeed in religious and cultural practices, become apparent, as do their frustrations at being constantly positioned as outsiders (Kahani-Hopkins and Hopkins, 2002; see also Lewis, 1994; Klausen, 2005). This chapter attempts to destabilize dominant narratives of British Muslims as standing outside the public realm by analyzing the relationship between religious and public identities held by activists who are simultaneously Arab, Muslim, British, and participants in the public realm.

The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the role of 'difference' in the public sphere and in the construction of 'the public.' We argue that religious identities in general, and Muslim identities in particular, are uneasily incorporated into Western conceptualizations of the public sphere. We show that discourses about Western secular liberalism and Islam pivot on several dichotomies – public/private, East/West, rational/irrational, cultural/political – that people must negotiate, and we explore these negotiations from the perspective of British Arab activists.

We argue, specifically, that many activists attempt to bring Arab identities into the public sphere and that they encourage other community members to do so, as well. But being (for the most part) Muslim, their religious identities are also brought into public. This is not because *they* attempt to politicize their religion, but is rather because Islam has been politicized in *other* public discourses, including those that operate in public policy, in the broader community of British Muslims, and in the stereotypes held by the 'public' at large. In this context, we argue, many British Arab activists often attempt to validate Islam as a matter of faith and culture, but not as the basis of politics. In so doing, these activists distinguish between public and private spheres while also acknowledging the *simultaneity* of religious and secular identities.

The neutral public, the problem of difference, and the ‘Muslim challenge’

Jack Straw’s views on the violation of societal norms by fully veiled Muslim women speak to a variety of tensions inherent in ideas of ‘the public’ as it has been conceived in Western liberal democracies. The idealized public sphere celebrates the unmediated interaction between strangers and the free expression of diverse opinions and views among rational individuals (see Habermas (1989) for one characterization). In practice, however, this conceptualization of the public relies on the marginalization or concealment – socially and spatially – of those whose differences are seen to undermine the public’s inherent neutrality and rationality (Marston, 1990; Young, 1990). Women, for instance, have been seen historically as embodying irrationality by virtue of their reproductive roles, and thus have been excluded from male-dominated spaces of paid employment and politics (Pateman, 1989; Walby, 1994; Lister, 1997). Likewise, people of colour have been placed outside of the public on account of their ‘inherent’ racial characteristics (Jackson, 1987), an exclusion enforced through myriad systems of segregation and discrimination. While some of the ways in which exclusion is enforced are social, a wide variety of government policies serve to hide difference (e.g., through regulations that sustain segregation or that limit access to public spaces (Anderson, 1988)) or encourage assimilation of cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences (e.g., through immigration and citizenship policies (Sassen, 1999)).

As these examples indicate, the liberal public is predicated on the construction, enforcement, and regulation of social differences in order to create a veneer of neutrality and inclusiveness. It would be a mistake, however, to see the social distinctions that frame the public as static and inflexible. History is replete with struggles to alter and to expand the public and to contest exclusion from public spheres and spaces (D. Mitchell, 1995). Feminist and civil rights movements, for instance, have resulted in fuller (though by no means complete) incorporation of women and minorities into the public sphere by extending the franchise to them, outlawing discrimination against them, and increasing their access to the workplace and the political sphere (Staeheli and Cope, 1994). The advent of multiculturalism, as well, can be seen as expansive by recognizing and incorporating – rather than denying – difference in the public sphere. In all of these examples, the many dichotomies structuring the public—public and private, rational and irrational,

national and foreign, among others—have been re-negotiated and, to some extent, reformulated through the political mobilization of subordinated groups.

Yet differences that frame understandings of the public are not eliminated through mobilization so much as they are reconfigured in relation to new ‘challenges’ that confront societies and publics. In many Western societies today, the so-called ‘Muslim challenge’ (Klausen, 2005) relates, in part, to common conceptions of the political nature of Islam and the influence of radical religious extremism on the politics of the Muslim world (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996). For Western societies, the path to modernity has been marked by the de-legitimization of religious authority in the political process and, to varying degrees, the legal separation between the religious and the political (or ‘church and state’) (Salvatorre, 2004). Religion, in this sense, has been confined, along with other forms of irrationality, into the realm of private life.¹ The presumed lack of distinction between religion and politics in the Muslim world, therefore, signifies inherent irrationality, anti-modernism and backwardness—a conception reinforced by the constant stream of media images of suicide bombers, beheadings, and burqas that flow from the Muslim world (A. Ahmed, 1992).²

In Western states, Muslim populations have come to be viewed as intensely problematic in the wake of post-War migrations, Muslim visibility in public space through the wearing of headscarves, the construction of mosques, and requests for the provision of prayer spaces in universities and workplaces (Dwyer, 1993; Ehrkamp, 2006; Salvatorre, 2004). An overt Islamic identity represents for many a threat to the neutral public by a religious tradition that is often claimed to be the antithesis of liberalism, rationality, and modernity (see Said, 1978; L. Ahmed, 1992). Crucially, Muslims are often perceived to be purposefully defying the neutrality and secularity of national societies and excluding themselves from the public by marking themselves out as different; in this regard, Jack Straw’s views are consistent with those of the broader public in many Western societies. Under these conditions, the balance between freedom of religious expression and secular liberalism has become a contentious issue (see Soysal, 1997; Turner, 2002). Increasingly, the response to Muslim visibility and political claims in many European countries has been the scaling back of multiculturalism – which has been blamed for the flourishing of radical Islamic identity – and the reassertion of ‘core national values’ and assimilationist aims (Joppke, 2004; Lewis and Neal, 2005).

Debates about the appropriate role of Islam in the public sphere (and the limits of multiculturalism) are especially pronounced in state schools, which are key sites for the reproduction of citizens (Dwyer, 1993; Dwyer and Meyer, 1995; K. Mitchell, 2003). In France, for instance, concerns about the radicalization and non-integration of Muslims has fuelled on-going debates about the wearing of headscarves in schools, leading recently to a ban on all religious attire. In formulating the ban, French officials asserted the primacy of 'laicite' over individual religious freedom and the primacy of public neutrality over the right to express 'communitarian' difference (Bowen, 2007; Thomas, 2006). In Britain, no such principle of laicite governs the running of schools, and headscarves rows have been relatively rare. Nonetheless, the place of Islam in the school system has become highly contentious as the state – which has long supported Catholic, Anglican, and some Jewish schools – attempts to expand the provision of public education through 'faith schools'. While the state has agreed to maintain a small number of Muslim schools, discussions about increasing the number of these schools have been fraught with concerns over Muslim self-segregation, extremism, and the oppression of women (Golkusing, 2006; Modood and May, 2001).

School controversies, therefore, are indicative of the highly problematic position of Muslim minorities in public and in the collective imagination of Western nation-states. Overall, there is a pronounced tendency in public discourse in the West, perhaps most openly in Europe, to interpret the political claims of Muslim minorities in terms of the imposition of a fundamentalist, anti-modern Islam on a historically Christian, secularized, rational public. Seen in this light, 'Muslim' behaviours and practices are under the constant scrutiny of politicians, news reporters, teachers, and social commentators who evaluate such behaviours and practices in terms of Muslim (dis)loyalty, (non)integration, and (un)assimilability (Werbner, 2000).

Complicating Muslim public identities

The presumed incompatibility between the secularized, modern public sphere and a stereotype of Muslims as assuming an identity that is religious above all else and that is opposed to the modern west belies the highly variable ways in which Muslims practice and conceive of relationships between religion and politics and between

cultural difference and membership in the public. Macleod's (1991) groundbreaking study of the 'new veiling' in Egypt, for instance, indicates that Muslim women, particularly in the lower middle classes, have adopted religious dress for a variety of reasons, not all of them obviously religious or political. For some, Islamic fashions allow women to save money; for others, covering becomes important for young women who wish to work and study, but who also wish to avoid harassment on public transport and in the public spaces of congested cities. A key point made in Macleod's account and others is that the meanings and intents attached to particular 'Muslim' practices are multilayered and situated in localized political and social contexts. Above all, these practices represent a negotiation of the many dichotomies—modern/traditional, religious/cultural, public/private, female/male—that structure people's social and spatial mobility.

Recent research on Muslim minorities in the West has also explored the complexity of Muslim practices and identities and the different ways in which religious identity and belief enters into the formation of public and private identities. Dwyer's (1999) research on British Muslim fashion, for instance, examines the ways in which young Muslim women use the contested space of the school to fabricate, quite literally, new hybrid identities, undermining the static, unitary notions of Muslimness and Asianness that they encounter in both in society-at-large and in their families. A rather different example, is Kurien's (2001) description of Muslim Indian activists in the United States, who have positioned themselves explicitly as 'secularist' in opposition to the nationalist tendencies of their Hindu counterparts. For Indian American Muslim activists, secularism is central to the discourse of India as multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-cultural entity, and they promote this secularism in their attempts to influence US foreign policy toward India and in their efforts to build an identity in the US itself in conjunction with other Muslim American groups.

These diverse examples caution against any single, essentialist reading of Islam as 'challenging' Western notions of secular, liberal democracy, or of Muslims as constituting a population unwilling to engage with 'mainstream' society or enter the public realm. Clearly, it is important to recognize the growing importance of religious claims on political life and on public space in many national contexts and the challenge to secularism posed by politically assertive religious movements, including Christian movements. But it is also important to recognize the variability of

such claims and the different ways that individuals relate their religiosity to political participation, identities, and citizenship.

In the remainder of this chapter, we wish to unsettle the apparent dichotomies that frame many Western perceptions of Islam. We argue that ‘secular’ and ‘religious,’ ‘public’ and ‘private,’ ‘personal’ and ‘political,’ are not clearly demarcated spheres; they are, instead, sets of meanings and opportunities, often inscribed in particular spaces, that people interpret, appropriate, and transgress in everyday life (Staehele, 1996). We focus, in particular, on the ambivalence expressed by British Arab activists toward ‘Muslim’ as a public and a political identity. While levels of personal religiosity vary significantly among our interviewees, in most instances, they reject a ‘British Muslim’ identity, which they regard as inherently politicized and as non-representative of their own feelings about religion and politics. Our interviewees *do* wish to challenge stereotypes of Islam, to rehabilitate the public image of their religion, and to situate themselves as citizens and legitimate members of the public. But their efforts to do so are tied up with a broader effort to validate *Arab* cultural identities in Britain, rather than to create a public, Muslim identity. This particular negotiation, we wish to suggest, destabilizes mainstream conceptions of Islam, and at the same time rearranges the array of dichotomies—public and private, personal and political, extremist and rational—employed in everyday discourses about Muslims and Islam.

Being Arab, being Muslim

The 40 Muslim British Arabs³ interviewed for this study were identified through their involvement in Arab-oriented organizations—i.e. those organizations with a remit to address, serve, or promote people from Arab cultural backgrounds⁴. These individuals, who include both first and second-generation British Arabs, participate in a wide variety of community activities, including charity and humanitarian work, community organizing, social and cultural events, and political lobbying. Some of their activities are oriented toward the Arab world itself, while others focus more on developing local communities and fostering community participation in local and national politics. Many study participants are involved in multiple organizations, and a small number were identified through their involvement in Muslim organizations,

including both national lobbying groups, such as the Muslim Council of Britain, and smaller, mosque-based groups. On the whole, they are highly educated and have a professional status, reflective of the well-off economic position of British Arabs relative to other minority groups and even to the majority society (Al Rasheed, 1996), though it should be noted that several of the interviewees come from and continue to serve the most disadvantaged segments of the British Arab population, namely, Moroccans, Yemenis, and Iraqi refugees.

In the interviews, study participants were asked to explain political identities, their sense of community, their understandings of concepts like citizenship and multiculturalism, and the geographies of their political activities. We did *not* ask specific questions about religious faith, observance or mosque attendance, but issues of religion came up frequently as interviewees explained their sense of identity, their understandings of 'community', and their views on the major problems facing British Arabs. We also asked interviewees whether they identified with the category of British Muslim and to explain what this category signified to them. It is clear from the interviews that British Arab activists are cognizant of the often negative meanings about Islam that circulate in public discourse and of perceptions of Muslims as breaching the boundary between private religiosity and public life.

As we illustrate below, our respondents' ideas about the proper place of religion in everyday life reflect their careful and thoughtful consideration of how their personal beliefs fit into wider debates about extremism, integration, and citizenship. The relationships between faith, identity and politics they describe are complex, and even contradictory. Religiosity is an important motivation for our respondents, but that does not mean their activism is necessarily focused on Islam or religion. Rather faith remains intensely personal and private for most of our respondents, even as it shapes the way they view the world and how they participate in the public realm. Because of the politicized nature of debates about Islam in Britain and because of their relationship with Asian Muslims there, most of our respondents eschewed a political identity as British Muslim, and instead promoted an identity as British Arab. The paradox they confront, however, is that in order to promote an identity and a set of political claims as Arabs, they had to recognize the cultural association between Islam and Arabness. In their public political activity, then, they attempted to validate Islam and to educate British society about Islam. In so doing, their private identity became public, and to some degree, became political.

Faith as a private, not public, identity

For some of our interviewees, Islam is an important motivating force for activism, and some see their religious faith as closely tied to their reasons for becoming involved in community organizations and affairs. For instance, Amal⁵, an Iraqi exile who has lived in several countries, identifies herself quite emphatically as a 'Muslim woman' and describes her work to promote Iraqi art as spreading the 'peace that Islam advocates in the Quran'. Her identity is a complex blend of religion and nationality. She is a Muslim woman, identifies her nationality as 'citizen of the world', and promotes Iraqi art specifically. Another strong statement of faith as a motivation for activism comes from Rafik, a Yemeni-Arab community leader, who sees community participation as 'a very basic principle of the Muslim faith'. When asked about issues facing his community, he speaks about discrimination, reduced life chances for Yemenis, and the lack of recognition of and support for the community by government. In order to redress these issues, he wants the state to fund Islamic education in schools, in spite of the hesitation of local authorities. He describes state provision of Islamic education, in part, as a matter of fairness. Muslims, he remarked, 'are taxpayers, and they pay their dues to the Government agencies and the local authorities, and they feel unfairly treated by not giving them back the recognition and services they need.' But his preference is not for purely Islamic schools, but rather to have 'state-run schools providing cultural and religious education to different faith groups, by tutors and teachers from the same community backgrounds.' This would not just be education about Islam, but also about Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity. In the case of Muslims in particular, he argued this was important so that children 'grow up as British Muslims, with no need to adopt ideologies from outside. They will be British citizens, they will be brought up with accepted and approved values and principles.'

In both of these examples, our respondents rooted their activism in faith, arguing both that their faith provided a resource or model for positive social change and that it was important to be active as members of a faith community in order to dispel misunderstandings of Islam and to redress discrimination against Muslims. It is important to recognize, however, that while Islam was a motivation for them, it was not the singular focus of their politics. Islam, their knowledge of

the religion and their experiences of being Muslim shaped their goals and what they wanted to achieve. Their goals and aspirations, however, were not for a politicized form of Islam in Britain or elsewhere.

Islam as a private identity

Many interviewees regard themselves as devout and observant, but they tend to place religious belief firmly in the private realm and to see their religion strictly as a matter of personal faith. Indeed, they speak disparagingly about 'broadcasting' religious beliefs and thrusting religious identities into public spaces and spheres. An example of this sentiment comes from Shadi, a young man of Lebanese origin involved in charity fundraising, who suggests that publicizing Islamic beliefs puts Muslim minorities at odds with dominant social practices in mainstream spaces such as the workplace:

[Being Muslim] is a private identity. I think, as well, there is no need for these behavioural people or extreme Muslims to go out there and try to spread the word that 'Islam is the correct way and the way forward'. I think that everyone should do what they want with their religion, but keep it to themselves and their families. If I want to practice, I practice in my own time. I wouldn't like to see a Muslim colleague of mine asking for time off to go and do his prayers. I won't like to see that kind of stuff. I would feel they are putting in a bad name. Especially since he is Muslim and living in the UK, he has to respect the rights of the UK and stick with the rules. If he is not happy, go back home.

Another example of the private nature of religion is Suha, a young British-born woman of Iraqi heritage, who describes her religion as individualistic and personal.

I'm Muslim, but the thing is that my understanding of my religion is very much an individual relationship. I don't fall into any particular school. Because I grew up in isolation from other Muslims, I developed my own relationship with God. ... You can always consult an Islamic scholar or an Islamic academic who has read more than you, who can show you different view points, but you're responsible for your own belief. And I'm quite [proud]

of my religion. I wouldn't say I'm out there [makes a trumpeting sound]; you can't really tell who is a true Muslim. I would never shout about it, but maybe that's a result of growing up in isolation.

Viewing their own faith as private, individualistic, and moderate, these interviewees remark negatively on the politicization of Islam, and they oppose the way in which, from their standpoint, some Muslims have thrust Islam into public debate. Several study respondents remark negatively, in particular, on the transformation of political issues such as Palestine and Iraq into religious struggles. For instance, Ghazi, a community activist in Liverpool, speaks with concern about the infusion of political issues with religious content in his community and in the Muslim world itself:

[You] get the rise of the neo-right within the community, who are the children who have been influenced by certain elements within the community that focus on the religion. Unfortunately people ignored this in the early 1980s, and now we get a product. This is not only in the Yemeni community but the other Muslim communities worldwide--people who are disillusioned with what's going on out there and are anti-Western. Yes, there is suffering and there are issues that need to be addressed, but sometimes, for example, the Palestinian issue or the Iraq issue feeds into the Bush Administration, and that feeds that culture of hate.

Najwa, a young British-born woman of Palestinian origin, similarly criticizes the politicization of religion and the Islamicization of politics, especially with respect to the Palestinian issue, which has been important to her own political consciousness. As part of this discussion, she comments negatively on the adoption of the hijab by some Muslim women in Britain, arguing that the hijab has become a political and cultural statement rather than a symbol of personal religious devotion. Describing her encounters with young Muslim women at university, she states,

At University, there were some girls who, one day they'd show up with the hijab and whatever, and I'd be like, 'Why do you go from clubbing every five minutes to—hello [exaggerated]—wearing a headscarf?' I got the sense with

a lot of them that it was religious and spiritual to a certain extent, but it was much more some kind of cultural identity that they wanted to adopt, much more because they almost disagreed with the West politically—what was happening with the Palestinians, for example—and they wanted to reject everything cultural, as well.

These interviewees, therefore, distinguish their own religiosity from one that is linked to political protest, overt, and by implication, extreme. Their criticisms of certain types of Muslims and certain ways of practicing Islam reflect an awareness of and sensitivity to common perceptions of Muslims as disrespectful of boundaries between public and private realms, which in turn, places them at odds with Western society.

While our interviewees generally disapprove of the politicization and radicalization of Islam by some Muslims, they are also critical of the politicization of Islam by the dominant British society and the transformation of private faith into a matter of public debate and controversy. An example of this view is Rafiya, a young, British-born woman of Yemeni heritage who wears a hijab, but who, like many other interviewees, insists on the privacy of her faith. Rafiya speaks passionately about ‘feeling British’ and argues that her visible religiosity represents only a minor divergence from the ‘British way of life’. The problem with the hijab, from her perspective, is that non-Muslims construe it as a public, political statement of religious and cultural difference. Thus, she states,

I think that’s what a lot of people in this country see as negative things--the Muslims forming their own little community groups and they don’t want to do what we do. I think maybe it’s their ignorance. They feel threatened by the Muslims because they don’t know what that community is about, so that kind of ignorance has a negative effect on so-called multiculturalism and social cohesion. When I was at university, a lot of the students there were asking questions like “why do you wear the scarf?” and when I gave them the answers— a lot of them obviously haven’t grown up in diverse areas--they said that they didn’t know this and wouldn’t have dared to ask somebody because they thought that I might be offended.

In a variety of ways, then, our interviewees attest to the privacy of their own faith and disparage the ways in which religion has been inserted into the sphere of politics and public debate, whether through the actions and public behaviours of Muslims themselves or through the prejudices of non-Muslims toward Muslim practices. Their views signify a self-conscious response to the relentless association between Islam and political extremism. But they also signify the accommodation and affirmation of a particular notion of the public realm and the appropriate place of religion and religious identities within it.

Promoting Arab – not British Muslim – identities

Accompanying this insistence on religion as a private identity is an overwhelming rejection of a 'British Muslim' identity, which most study participants associate with the politicization of Islam as described above. Several study respondents object to the British Muslim category because of the negative meanings attached to it in the media in the wake of the Rushdie Affair, the 2001 urban riots, the 7/7 attacks, and so on. The British Muslim category has, for these interviewees, been irretrievably sullied by stereotypes about politically radical, extremist Islam that circulate in public discourse. Habeeb, a community leader in Sheffield, describes these negative meanings, while insisting on the need to privatize all identities with the exception of one's identity as a citizen. He states,

This term, I feel, has become controversial because it has been abused by the media and it's been used more as a stereotype more than a reference—the perceptions, sometimes, are stronger than the realities. The controversy [surrounding this term] has created a completely wrong perception about it. Within the social context of my life, I want to be referred to as a British citizen and that's enough for me. These other layers of identity, I don't think they're important to anyone. They're very important to me, of course, but to anyone else, I'm only a citizen and I want to be referred to as this.

Others see the term British Muslim as synonymous with British Pakistanis, who, while professing the same faith, have different political aims and interests than

British Arabs. Yemeni-born Munif, for instance, rejects the term British Muslim because,

It identifies me with a group that I'm not entirely sure I believe in what they 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.

As Munif's quote indicates, many of our interviewees see themselves as different from 'British Muslims' in terms of their political agendas and objectives and in terms of their cultural practices and religious attitudes. Some are quite explicit in their critiques of British Muslim variants of Islam, arguing that Asians' lack of understanding of Arabic—the language of the Quran—means that their faith and religious identity is based more on learning Islamic texts by rote rather than through interpretation of meanings. Again, a key theme that emerges from the respondents is the sense that *their* Islam is flexible, individualistic, and private.

Our respondents, then, drew distinctions between Arab, Asian, and perhaps British Islam. These distinctions were accompanied, as well, by statements of ecumenicalism, which many of our interviewees see as integral to Arabness. Study participants, in other words, tend to view Arabness as a multi-faith identity that requires a toned-down and more flexible conception of Islam than that associated with either Asian or British Muslims. A comment repeated in several interviews is that there are Christian, Jewish and Muslim Arabs. While modern Arab culture is infused with Islam – something noted by our Christian Arab respondents – Arab culture is not synonymous with the Islamic faith. Community leaders often emphasize that their organizations include Arabs of all faiths, and that the religious events that they sponsor—for instance, the celebration at the end of Ramadan—are open and intelligible to non-Muslims, and even to non-Arabs. These practices were often linked to a recognition of the history of shared traditions and common places of worship in Arab societies. Interviewees, for instance, refer to their comfort and familiarity with Christian churches and their sense that all religions are ultimately the same. Ramia, an Iraqi Shia active in women's organizations, describes her personal ecumenicalism in the following terms:

I am not extremist when it comes to religion, of course, but I fast, I pray. But at the same time I don't mind going to the Church to pray. I believe that when I say "I know I'm a Muslim", but it doesn't mean that I have to be like "Wow, I'm something special!"

In another instance, Leyla, a young British-born woman of Palestinian-Syrian origin, describes her view of all religions as sets of cultural practices and traditions as much as beliefs, and her wish to instill this perspective on religion in her children. She states,

I don't intend to raise my kids just knowing about Islam. They will know about all the religions. Sometimes it's nice to have, not a set of rules, but an identified practice. Practices and traditions, even when it's not to do with religion, are lovely things. They create community, and it's part of the culture, not just the religion. So people like to have these set practices, and I think that's what religions do.

The seemingly contradictory emphases on ecumenical and non-religious identities are central to the creation of an Arab identity that is distinguishable from a British Muslim identity. It is this Arab identity, rather than a British Muslim (or simply Muslim) identity, that most of our interviewees see themselves as publicizing and politicizing and that they tie explicitly to concepts like citizenship.

In asserting a public, Arab identity, interviewees are insistent that their identities not be submerged by an Asian-dominated British Muslim identity in the political sphere. Instead, they suggest, British Arabs must seek their own representation based on a specific Arab identity and Arab political interests, rather than religion. Tareq, the British-born son of Egyptian parents, argues, for instance,

I am very aware that the state of Islam in Britain is Asian, it is not Arab, and when there are spokespersons on TV, nine times out of ten they are Asian. That's not a bad thing, but they do not represent me, and nor does the Muslim Council of Britain...but the Government is talking to them because they represent the Asian Muslim community and that is the community that matters here. We don't really matter in the same sense.

In another example, Wajih, a Yemeni-born community activist in London who is a member of a large British Muslim organization, describes the need to mobilize British Arabs and to promote British Arab identity in public forums and local councils. He describes his disappointment about the lack of Arab representation on a committee formed recently by the Home Office to tackle extremism, stating that authorities were 'treating Arabs either as part of the Asian community or of the Muslim community in general. They are not talking to Arabs as a separate identity.' He continues, 'From a democratic point of view, Arabs should be represented better by those who can speak the mind of the British Arabs.'

Being a British Arab and the public validation of Islam

Our interviewees, however, cannot escape the fact that Arabness is culturally bound up with Islam. In order to present themselves and their communities as fully participating in British society, therefore, they attempt to validate Islam by educating the British public – as well as Arab communities – about the religion and its connection with Arab culture. Yet the advancement of Arab identities, for many activists, also rests upon public discussion of an identity they would often prefer be seen as private. At the same time, validation of Islam for these activists often means separation from a British Muslim identity, which, they argue, publicizes and politicizes religious affiliation. And so they confront a paradox: what they view as a private matter – their religion and faith – has to be brought into the public sphere through cultural and educational programmes that presented a particular view of Islam.

The strategies they follow reflect their awareness of local political controversies about the (non)integration of British Muslims and wider discourses about the politicization and radicalization of Islam. This awareness becomes intertwined with their understandings of the historically multi-faith nature of Arab societies and, in a few cases, with their personal experiences of being raised in mixed Muslim-Christian Arab families. For our interviewees, the multiculturalism of the Arab world is a precursor to European multiculturalism. They argue that Arabs, perhaps more than other Muslim groups, are open, tolerant, cosmopolitan, and suited to membership in the West. Indeed, for many of our interviewees, it is the

West, and not they, who have reneged on the commitment to cultural openness and religious tolerance. Yet, while these narratives of Islam and Arabness emphasize tolerance and flexibility, they also rely upon distinctions between different kinds of Muslims and the ways in which they place their faith in the public sphere. Their negotiations of 'public' and 'private' and 'religious' and 'secular', therefore, rest on the simultaneity of identities and beliefs that otherwise seem incapable of occupying the same political space. These negotiations reflect the complex and contradictory nature of the relationships between religiosity and the public sphere, rather than enduring binaries or dichotomies.

Conclusions

This chapter has attempted to complicate common perceptions about the relationship of Muslim minorities to the public spheres and spaces of Western societies. For many politicians and other public figures and commentators, Muslim minorities pose a threat to national societies by the claims they make in the political sphere. Muslim minorities in many respects have been construed as a group that is both unable and unwilling to conform to national culture and that violates the division between private faith and public life in secular, Western society. This account has focused on the multiple dichotomies upon which this narrative rests—public/private, Islam/West, religious/secular, and so on—and which Muslim minorities must negotiate in formulating their political identities and activism. For the British Arab activists we interviewed, this negotiation involves formulating a distinctive sense of religiosity that is simultaneously personal and private, that is not the basis of politics, but that must be explained in public in order to participate in the public sphere.

This account, we hope, goes some way toward adding complexity to the characterizations about Muslims that we find not only in public discourse, but also in academic scholarship. Scholars have made many valuable efforts in recent decades to debunk pervasive negative stereotypes of Islam and Muslims (e.g. Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996; Esposito, 1999). But this literature does not fully address the diversity of political positions and identities found among Muslims, or the instability of 'Muslim' as a political category. Likewise, recent investigations of Muslim transnationalism (for instance, Bowen, 2004), while expanding our understandings of the social and geographical fields in which Muslims create identities, provides only a

limited view of the ways in which Muslims conceive of religion and its relationship to public identities and spaces. The political identities of Muslim people are almost inevitably tied up with political events in the Muslim world and with globalized narratives about the supposed 'clash' between Islam and the West. Yet, at least for Muslim immigrants and minorities in the West, questions about integration are never far from the surface, and any investigation of Muslim identities must consider the diverse ways in which religious identities enter into the negotiation of social membership within national and local spaces.

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¹ This is not to say that religion does not enter into politics in Western societies. Religiously minded individuals and groups have often brought particular claims to the public sphere in modern Western societies (for a review, see Kunzman, 2005). Most notable in recent years have been Christian evangelical movements, who have had an increasingly important influence on US politics. Nonetheless, most Western societies have experienced a marked decline in religious observance and in the authority of religious institutions on people's everyday behaviours, signified by the precipitous decline of mainline churches. For many in Europe and North America, 'religion' has not disappeared altogether, but has been replaced by more individualistic conceptions of spirituality (Bruce, 2002).

² The growing demand for a 'return' to Islamic principles in societal governance is, in fact, an important phenomenon in many parts of the Muslim world, borne of the failure of Western-oriented development agendas to deliver material well-being to rapidly expanding populations (Woltering, 2002; Esposito, 2002). But no single, enduring relationship between religion and political establishment has existed historically in the Muslim world (Ayubi, 1991), and even contemporary Islamist organizations vary significantly in terms of their political objectives vis-à-vis the state, (Esposito, 2002). More importantly, despite a resurgence of religiosity and religious expression in many Muslim countries, the depth of people's commitment to particular political agendas is far from certain (Macleod, 1991). The subtleties and complexities of politics and Islam and Islamism, however, tend to be lost in Western public discourse

³ We interviewed 42 British Arab activists for this study, but two of these identified themselves as Christian Arabs.

⁴ Some of the organizations were identified with a particular Arab nationality, such as Iraqi or Yemeni. But many of these nationally defined organizations, in fact, serve the general Arabic-speaking/ Arab-origin population. We encountered several community centres and organisations who have changed their name in recent years to reflect the diversity of their clientele and members.

⁵ All names are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of respondents.