

British Muslims: A question of identity Secretary General's speech for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office seminar

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In the preface to his witty and perceptive book *The English* Jeremy Paxman neatly sums up the problem of defining identity. "Being English used to be so easy" he writes. "They were one of the most easily identified peoples on earth, recognised by their language, their manners, their clothes and the fact that they drank tea by the bucketload. Yet it is all so much more complicated now".

Of course, as Paxman demonstrates things were never that simple. But it doesn't get easier when we shift focus to the wider question of British national identity – as we must – since we cannot begin to explore what British Muslim identity means without an understanding of the nature of British identity. The two are inextricably linked.

What constitutes British national identity has been the subject of debate for some time now. The political scientist Bhikhu Parekh traces its origins to landmark socio-political developments such as the loss of empire, the rise of the welfare state, post-war immigration, the EU and recently by devolution. John Major famously characterised Britain as comprising old maids cycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist, warm beer and long shadows across the country grass. In stark contrast Tony Blair sees Britain as a diverse, entrepreneurial, young and cool country. And when we can't agree we role out the usual suspects of handy adjectives: stiff upper lips, cucumber sandwiches, fair-play and decency. So you can see why I rather agree with Parekh when he says that "national identity is too complex and elusive to be reduced to a set of easily identifiable features or summed up in a few neat propositions. Every definition of it highlights some features, ignores or marginalises others, and is inherently partial or partisan".

The point of taking you down that seemingly fruitless journey trying to define British national identity is to highlight that very fact: there is no single and widely accepted definition of what it means to be British. It is constantly evolving.

The concept of individual identity on the other hand is less open to disagreement. By and large we understand and agree that identity is important and we have multiple identities, some more enduring – and more important than others. Most of you in the audience today for instance share a professional identity as civil servants working for the Foreign Office. Whilst important, that doesn't necessarily define who you are. In other words, if you stopped working for the government, or for that matter if you moved to a different town, or changed your gym, you wouldn't necessarily become altogether different people. But other characteristics have a much more profound impact upon who we are. This includes our culture, ethnicity, language, values, morals and of course religion. Whilst we can all differ in which of these characteristics matter most to us – and by no means do I present an exhaustive list – we can all agree that these attributes make us who we are. They profoundly influence our behaviour, provide us with belonging and a sense of purpose. And within certain parameters they do not radically change.

In the context of our discussion we're interested in the importance of faith in identity formation. This has long been an overlooked area – until very recently. A notable exception is work carried out by Tariq Modood and his colleagues for the Policy Studies Institute and published in 1997. Examining culture and identity they concluded that "religion is central in the self-definition of the majority of South Asian people".

Up till recently, ethnicity and skin colour were considered to be the most significant features of identity to the exclusion of other factors such as faith. It has been through work like Modood's and vigorous campaigning by faith groups including the Muslim Council of Britain that helped push faith further up the agenda. The inclusion of the religion question in the census was a particularly important development. Initially opposed by many within government and academia this battle was hard won. But the results are here for all to see. Not only does this allow us to understand society better, it also helps in the planning and delivery of services to better meet the needs of our diverse population and target resources where it's needed most.

Having sketched out the parameters of the discussion and its background, let me now concentrate on British Muslim identity specifically.

My view of what it means to be a British Muslim is something more than a Muslim who holds a British passport. Nor does it mean we are merely Muslims in Britain – which denotes nothing more than a geographic association) This is too passive. It sounds almost like a coincidence. For despite the lack of agreement about what constitutes British identity we can all agree that it is more than the possession of a British passport. It implies a sense of belonging. It has an emotional dimension. Similarly, British Muslims are not an island unto themselves. The practice of our faith and our identity as Muslims is affected and influenced by our surroundings. What I'm trying to get at here is that I believe there is something we can begin to call a British Muslim identity, different to say a French Muslim identity or a Bangladeshi Muslim identity. Something rooted in our British experience. And something that's not apparent only when we find ourselves abroad.

This is very much something that in its early stages. So what does it look like and what are its drivers?

At its core British Muslim identity recognises the primacy of Islam in making us who we are. In doing so it recognises no ethnic or cultural boundaries or differences. It guides our behaviour, shapes our outlook and gives us purpose. Britain gives us our focus our belonging and the context in which we live our lives. British Muslim implies a fusion of the two. It helps Muslims add value to British society as active and responsible citizens.

That may be its essence, but how it will manifest itself is a more difficult question to answer simply because it's something that is still in development. Suffice to say however that we're talking about something much more than cucumber sandwiches being dished out at the local mosque. I mock of course but stranger things have happened. For instance there used to be a muezzin – someone who calls Muslims to prayer – at Regent's Park mosque who was an English convert to Islam. When he gave the call to prayer it sounded churchy, almost as if he'd been plucked out of a choir. The words were of course the same – Arabic – but his delivery was distinctly western.

Of course there will be a number of experiments along the way. But the vision is to be able to forge a society where Muslims can be proud to be both British and Muslim and non-Muslim Britons can accept Islam as part and parcel of their shared national experience. This involves adaptation and open-mindedness on both sides.

For the second part of the question I'd like to identify four drivers of British Muslim identity development.

The first is the diversity within the Muslim community. British Muslims are a microcosm of British society as a whole. We are one of the most diverse faith communities in Britain. As the census demonstrates, a third of Muslims identify their ethnicity as outside the Indian subcontinent. Approximately half a million Muslims comprise White Muslims, those of Black ethnicity and mixed race people. In fact, the Muslim community contains a larger proportion of mixed race people than any other faith community. Therefore, this diversity within the Muslim community is set to increase.

Secondly, increasing diversity within the Muslim community sits within an increasingly diverse makeup of Britain itself. The presence of other minority faith and ethnic communities reinforces the position of all minority groups. Another consequence of this diversity is the recognition that we nestle multiple identities. I can simultaneously be a Briton, an east African Asian, an Indian, a Hindi speaker and of course, a Muslim.

The third driver of British Muslim identity is the role of Muslim institutions. The MCB for instance is very clear in its view of the role and position of Muslims in Britain. We see Muslims as part and parcel of British society. Not as bystanders but full citizens. This accords us rights but also entails responsibilities to others. So, whilst the MCB's main concern is the welfare of British Muslims we believe this must be sought by serving and sharing in the common good of our society as a whole. By emphasising our identity as bound up with that of the country I believe we help strengthen British Muslim identity.

Fourthly and most importantly, I would like to highlight the pioneering role our young people are playing in shaping what I referred to earlier as the developing picture of British Muslim identity. It is they, more than people like me, who will determine what a British Muslim identity looks and feels like. Their awareness of, but some detachment from the cultural heritage of their parents will allow them to draw more widely from the varying cultural heritages Muslims from different parts of the globe bring. They will pick and mix. They will also be able to advance areas which we've only just began to explore. For instance – what is the Muslim contribution to the arts, to literature to British culture? Interesting times lie ahead. But the goal must be a British Muslim identity into which the entire Muslim community – with all its diversity – can be accommodated and one that sits comfortably within the context of a multi-faith and multi-ethnic Britain.

Like any adventure what happens along the way is just as important as what you find when you arrive at your destination. Identity formation will reflect contemporary events. They will reflect the very best of what we have achieved as British Muslims. But they will not neglect our concerns. The ugly spectre of Islamophobia at home and the victimisation of Muslims abroad will not fail to leave their mark. The more included and accepted young Muslims feel the more they can use their energies creatively and the more celebratory their outlook. The more they have to feel aggrieved at injustice the more campaigning their outlook. I guess in the end will have a mixture of both. But quite what the mixture is will depend on what sorts of decisions we take now.

I've tried to outline some of my thoughts on British Muslim identity. The fact that faith identity is now recognised and accorded its rightful place as a signifier of identity is to be welcomed. It doesn't seek to replace other forms of identity – such as ethnicity, culture or language. No doubt for some Muslims – like myself, faith identity will be their primary marker of who they are. For others faith will sit alongside other markers of identity that I've just mentioned. It depends upon the individual. But what we do know is that faith and faith identity is increasingly important for British Muslims.