

The Muslims in London:

Striving for self-sufficiency without isolation

London - Manal Ameer



Muslims celebrating Eid in the Central mosque in London.

المسجد المركزي بلندن يوم العيد.

From the Arabian Peninsula Islam emerged and spread to the rest of the world through conquest, missionary endeavours and in some cases through trade. Yet it remained alien and mysterious to this part of the globe until the arrival of the first group of Muslim sailors. These individuals settled and established a community which, in time, attracted more immigrants until it became the second largest community in Britain.

History

The first incident that mentions Islam in British history goes back to the 12th century when Pope Innocent III excommunicated King John as a result of his support for, and corporation with, the North African Amir Mohammed Al-Nasir. The King sent an emissary offering to help in their campaign against the catholic King of Aragon in Spain. This angered the church.

Three centuries later history recorded the first Englishman to convert to Islam: John Nelson who embraced Islam in 1583. A few

years after that a wave of Englishmen began to convert to Islam. A 1643 document refers to the discovery of "a sect of Mahomatens" in London - this sect became the second largest faith in Britain. According to statistics, there are about 1.6 million Muslims in Britain today. The actual figure is probably closer to two million or 3% of the population. Half of Britain's Muslim community is found in London.

Worship

The early Muslims in Britain were keen to

keep their religion alive. This was reflected in their enthusiasm to build mosques and to find places to gather in for religious purposes such as preaching, lectures, and to teach Quran to their children.

The first mosque dates back to 1860 and the address is still known to many: 2 Glyn Rhodda Street, Cardiff. Today there are about 1500 mosques in the United Kingdom and hundreds of Islamic centres that offer many different forms of assistance to the community such as matrimonial services which include Islamic marriages, divorces ➔

Islamic Communities

and family counselling. They also arrange Islamic funerals. A good example is the Islamic Cultural Centre in London. There are also charitable organisations which work to improve the understanding of Islam and help members of the community.

Most of these mosques run Islamic classes on weekends for children aged 6 to 16. They teach Arabic language, the Quran and Islamic studies. Their services are also available to non Muslims as a part of the Daawa (Islamic missionary work).

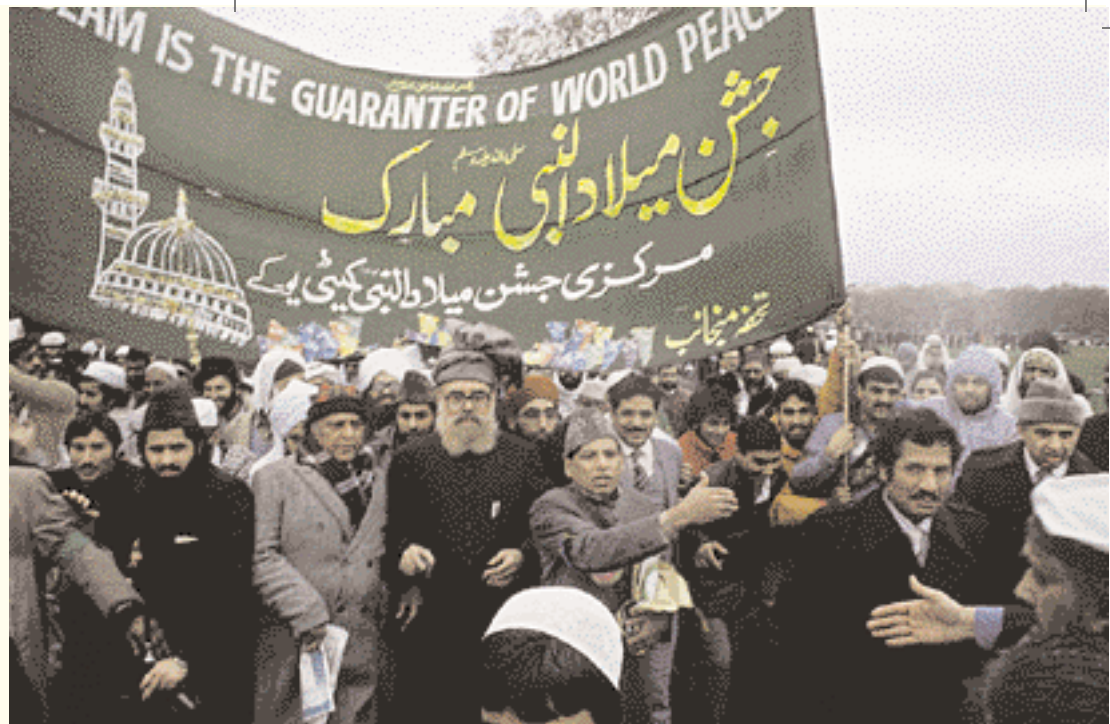
Muslims have the freedom to practice their prayers and rituals and to celebrate their festivals. This is most evident during Ramadan (the fasting month). Most of London's mosques offer Iftar (breakfast) and those who have been fasting come to the mosques to break their fast together.

Schools

Muslim immigrants came from different countries and even continents: some from North Africa, others from the Asian subcontinent and the Middle East. Each group brought different traditions and cultures with them even though they all shared the same religious beliefs and values, which helped them to construct a community with a single aim and vision.

One of their main aims was to bring up their children as good Muslims and to teach them all the Islamic principles. This is why the community attached prime importance to Islamic education and set up many Islamic schools. These schools are run by people from different ethnic origins and backgrounds, but they all share the same Islamic identity. The schools are funded by

different organisations: The UK Islamic Education Waqf, for instance, raises money which is donated to the schools.



A demonstration to commemorate the birth of the Prophet.

تظاهرة بمناسبة ميلاد النبي (ص).

The first Islamic school was a place where children went on weekends to study the Quran and Arabic language. Parents used to rent rooms for this purpose until the government offered them more suitable facilities. However, with time, the community felt the need to create an Islamic atmosphere in which they could bring up their children. This was the initial motive behind establishing the first Islamic primary and secondary school (where up to 85% of the financial needs are met by the education authority under the 1944 education act).

A number of Islamic schools have now been established such as Islamiah, Al-Zahra, Al-Sadiq, Avenue and King Fahad academy. Although these schools teach the same British curriculum, as public schools they have succeeded in creating an ideal Islamic society for their pupils.

The schools have a very strict

discipline, misbehaviour is not accepted and can result in expulsion. Their code of conduct is inspired by the Quran. But this is not to suggest that Muslims are in favour of isolation: since their arrival they have lived peacefully with the host society. They are merely seeking to ensure Islamic values are passed on to their children and that their children do not lose their Islamic identity.

Alongside schools, Muslims established shops such as Halal butchers and restaurants where they do not serve alcoholic drinks and even clothes shops where they sell Islamic costumes for ladies. These shops are scattered all around London but most are found in areas where Muslims are the majority, such as Edgware Road.

All the semblances of Islamic life are found in London: schools, mosques, shops and even cemeteries. Muslims live alongside members of other religions in peace, in a city of diverse faiths. ■

Quranic school.

فتيات يقرأن القرآن الكريم.

