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The Attitude of Young Sunnī Muslims in Britain Towards Religious Authority

Britanya'daki Genç Sünnî Müslümanların Dini Otoriteye Karşı Tutumu

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The attitude of Young Sunnī Muslims in Britain towards Religious Authority*

Abstract

The absence of one single religious authority for the whole Muslim community in Britain results in the emergence of various religious authorities due to ethnic and sectarian differences. Muslim communities in Britain have generally been ghettoized around ethnic and sectarian identities, and thus establishing mosque and religious authority accordingly. This paper investigates what the sources of religious authority for British born young Sunnī Muslims are. The data was gathered via an ethnographic research made in Leeds, one of the most cosmopolitan cities of Britain, interviewing young Sunnī British Muslims who are between 18 and 30 years old. The main aim of this study is to reflect on how and where these young Muslims get religious advice for their daily religious lives. This paper presents the preferences of the informants in seeking religious authority in the context of Britain. It is particularly significant to discover the orientation of British born Muslims from that aspect. Based on the preferences of young Sunnī Muslims in searching religious authority in Leeds, this paper initially introduces four mosque imāms, who lie at the centre of religious authority for ordinary Muslims. By dealing with them, I expose the role of mosque imāms in the life of Sunnī Muslims in Britain. The types of the questions raised by the mosque attendees and their methods in approaching the imāms are reported while each imām's profile is examined. Then, I focus on two famous figures who issue religious rulings and have a special importance in the religious lives of Muslims in Leeds. Finally, the Internet is examined as a virtual platform in seeking religious authority for ordinary Muslims living in Britain. Thus, this study offers two main results: From different sectarian orientations, such as Deobandī, Barēlwī and Jamāʿat-i Islāmī, they generally admit that following a school of law (Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfiʿī, and Ḥanbalī) in current is essential for a lay person. Therefore, the tendency among them in seeking religious guidance initially starts from local mosque imāms, and then widened with more expert ʿulamāʾ repudiated across their ethnic and sectarian oriented communities.

Keywords: The History of Islamic Sects, Religious Authority, Sunnī, Young British Muslims, Imām, Religious Experts.

Britanya'daki Genç Sünnî Müslümanların Dini Otoriteye Karşı Tutumu**

Öz

Britanya'daki tüm Müslüman toplumu için tek bir dini otoritenin olmaması, etnik ve mezhepsel farklılıklara bağlı olarak pek çok dini otoritenin oluşmasına neden olmaktadır. Britanya'daki Müslüman topluluklar genelde etnik ve mezhepsel kimlikler etrafında kümeleştiklerinden ötürü camileri ve dini otoriteyi de buna göre oluşturmuşlardır. Bu makale, Britanya doğumlu genç Sünnî Müslümanlar için dini otoritenin ne olduğunu araştırmaktadır. Bu çalışmada kullanılan veriler Britanya'nın en kozmopolit şehirlerinden biri olan Leeds şehrinde, etnografik bir çalışmayla 18-30 yaş aralığındaki genç- Sünni Müslümanlarla yapılan mülakatlardan elde edilmiştir. Bu çalışmanın temel gayesi bu genç Müslümanların günlük dini yaşamlarında dini tavsiyeleri nereden ve nasıl aldıklarını yansıtmaktır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, Britanya bağlamında

* The author confirms that this paper has been developed from his PhD thesis entitled "Sunni Muslim Religiosity in the UK Muslim Diaspora: Mosques in Leeds Compared" (The University of Leeds, England, 2013).

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araştırmaya katılan kişilerin dini otorite arayışlarındaki tercihlerini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu açıdan özellikle Britanya doğumlu genç Müslümanların eğilimini ortaya koymak son derece önemlidir. Bu makale, başlangıç olarak katılımcıların tercihlerine dayalı olarak Müslümanlar için dini otoritenin merkezinde bulunan dört cami imamını takdim etmektedir. Onları ele almakla, Britanya'daki Sünni Müslümanların yaşamlarında cami imamlarının rolü ortaya konulmaktadır. Her bir imamın profili incelenirken camii cemaatinin hangi sorular sorduğu ve imamlara yaklaşım metodu yansıtılmaktadır. Daha sonra, Leeds 'teki Müslümanların dini yaşamlarında özel bir önemi olan ve fetva veren iki meşhur din uzmanı ele alınmaktadır. Son olarak da Britanya'da yaşayan sıradan Müslümanların dini otorite arayışında sanal bir bilgi kaynağı olarak internet incelenmektedir. Böylece bu çalışma başlıca iki sonuç ortaya koyar: Britanya'daki genç Müslümanlar Deobandī, Barēlwī ve Cema'ati İslâmî gibi farklı mezhebi kimliklerden de olsalar da sıradan bir Müslümanın belli bir ameli mezhebi (Hanefî, Şafiî, Malikî ve Hanbelî) takip etmenin elzem olduğunu kabul etmektedirler. Diğeri ise onların dini otorite arayışındaki eğilimlerinin genelde ilk olarak yerel cami imamından başlayıp sonra da onların etnik ve mezhebi çevrelerinde meşhur olan daha uzman ulemaya kadar geniş çevreye ulaşmasıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İslam Mezhepleri Tarihi, Dîni Otorite, Sünni, Genç-İngiliz Müslümanlar, İmam, Din Uzmanları.

Introduction

There is no clergy class in Sunnī Islam. Coming from the Creator, the Qurʾān exists at the centre in directing the believers what to do in terms of religious and moral obligations. The messengers (*rusūl*) deliver what they received from Allāh to humans and explain the meaning. Religious duties and moral obligations are best exemplified by their lives. Hence, they play a crucial role in mediating between Allāh and humans. It can be concluded that the absolute religious authority is Allāh; and the messengers with their mediator role in delivering the message, commenting on it, and implementing the instructions to daily life. As regards the last prophet Muḥammad, his sunna after his death consisted of his sayings, approvals, and advice to the believers which constitute the second source as religious authority in terms of maintaining that mediator role. Consequently, the ʿulamāʾ bear in mind in terms of producing and deriving the rules from these two sources.

The term of ʿulamāʾ is plural form of ʿālim and literally means "Islamic scholars". The ʿulamāʾ may include various professions such as, imām or shaykh (leads prayers), muftī (gives personal opinion based on derived rulings), mujtahid and qāḍī (derive rules from the Qurʾān and Sunna or update existing ones when needed). From the early years of Islam, the ʿulamāʾ have developed a cumulative methodology in deriving rules from the sources. Traditionally, the ʿulamāʾ engage with the sources in order to solve the problems of lay persons in terms of understanding the sources, deriving rules from them, and implementing the rules to their life. In countries, where Muslims are the majority, they have a ministry or directorate for religious affairs, but this is not the case in countries where Muslims live as minorities. Furthermore, the

diversity of Muslims in Britain with various ethnic and sectarian identities as mentioned in the relevant literature,[1] makes the situation more complex in terms of religious authority.

The main aim of this paper is to reflect on what religious authority is for young Sunnī Muslims in Britain. With this aim in mind, one of the most populated cities of Britain, Leeds has been chosen since it has a cosmopolite Muslim community. The number of Muslims in Leeds is 63,054[2] according to the 2021 census data. Although there are many sectarian orientations within the Muslim community, they mainly consist of two sects, namely Sunnī and Shīʿa. This study deals with the former confining itself to the majority of the Muslim population as is the case in Britain.

1. Methodology

This study employs qualitative research methods including participant observation, structured and semi-structured interviews with both ʿulamāʾ and lay persons, and collection of ephemeral materials in the fieldwork location. The first place for the fieldwork comes to mind is the mosque. It has a special importance for migrant Muslim communities in order to observe religious obligations as everywhere else in non-Muslim countries. Consequently, four biggest mosques of Leeds have been chosen to conduct this study. These are namely, Leeds Grand Mosque (LGM; predominantly Arab, Ikhwanī/Salafī), Leeds Makkah Masjid (LMM; South Asian, Barēlwī), Leeds Islamic Centre (LIC; South Asian, Deobandī), and Leeds Iqra Centre (IC; South Asian, Jamāʿat-i Islāmī). The communities of these mosques represent both ethnic and sectarian diversity of the whole Muslim community in Leeds, where at least 23 registered mosques exist.

As noted above, these four mosques represent prototypes of ethnic and sectarian orientation. Not only the selected mosque imāms and religious experts but also ordinary people in the congregation contributed to this research as informants. In each of the selected mosques, at least 10 people were interviewed. This number includes both members of the congregation and the mosque imams and other religious experts. Whenever I cite them throughout this paper, the

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[1] Alison Shaw, *A Pakistani Community in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Philip J. Lewis, *Bradford's Muslim Communities and the Reproduction and Representation of Islam* (Leeds: Leeds University Phamplets, 1993); Zaki Badawi, *Islam in Britain* (London: Ta ha Publishing, 1981); Ron Geaves, *Sectarian Influences Within Islam in Britain with Reference to the Concepts of 'Ummah' and 'Community'* (Leeds: Leeds University, 1996); Stewen W. Barton, *The Bengali Muslims of Bradford: A Study of Their Observance of Islam with Special Reference to the Function of the Mosque and the Work of the İmām*. (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1986); Birt, J. and Lewis, P., 'The Pattern of Islamic Reform in Britain: The Deobandis between Intra-Muslim Sectarianism and Engagement with Wider Society', *Producing Islamic Knowledge: Transmission and Dissemination in Western Europe*, ed. S. Allievi and M.V. Bruinessen (London: Routledge, 2010); Philip Lewis, *Young, British and Muslim* (London: Continuum, 2008).

[2] Office for National Statistics/ ONS/ https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021 (13 December 2022).

names of interviewees have almost always been anonymised using pseudonyms. Exceptionally, and with their explicit written consent following email exchanges sharing details of the relevant text and quotations to be included in this article, I have used the real names of certain well-known local religious experts. These are as follows: Qari Asim (imam of Leeds Makkah Masjid), Sheikh Muhammad Taher (imam of Leeds Grand Mosque), Hasan al-Katib (ex-president of Leeds Muslim Forum) and Sheikh Abdullah al-Judai (member of the European Council for Fatwa and Research). As noted already, three of the mosques were predominantly attended by people of South Asian ethnicity, while one was Arab. Gender was a constraint in terms of recruiting interviewees, thus all participants were among male congregation.

Based on the first-hand information gained from the fieldwork research, this paper describes the patterns of religious authority including mosque imāms, religious experts, and the internet (as a virtual platform enabling to access religious rulings and advices), respectively. The relevant literature[3] proposes that local researches can be applied to national level in order to understand the representation of sectarian and ethnic influences on the Muslim community. As a result, this ethnographic research in Leeds offers similar characteristics in the perception of religious authority for young Sunnī Muslims in Britain.

2. Results and discussion: The Preference of Young Sunnī Muslims in Seeking Religious Authority

During the formation of Islamic Law, religious authority among Sunnī Muslims was gradually institutionalised and developed into plural schools of law, namely Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shāfiʿī, and Ḥanbalī. "Legal specialists or jurists"[4] played pivotal roles in the formation of Islamic law. In practical terms, the different classes of ʿulamāʾ, as indicated above, obtained positions in the judiciary (*shariʿa* courts), educational institutions (general and Islamic learning), and in places of worship, or Sufī orders.[5] The ʿulamāʾ transmitted the knowledge of Islam to their pupils and followers, and as a result became the central point of religious authority in every cluster of the society, whether in a *madrasa* as a teacher, or in a Sufī group as a Sufī Shaykh. However, since encountering with western colonialism, the place of religious authority in Islam has been questioned. This is just one of the transformations of traditional institutions from military matters, education, law, and to politics. Furthermore, from the beginnings of reform in the 19th

[3] Jonathan Birt, "Good İmām, Bad İmām: Civic Religion and National Integration in Britain Post-9/11", *The Muslim World* 96 (2006), 687–705; Alison Shaw, *A Pakistani Community in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Lewis, *Bradford's Muslim Communities and the Reproduction and Representation of Islam*; Badawi, *Islam in Britain*; Geaves, *Sectarian Influences Within Islam in Britain*.

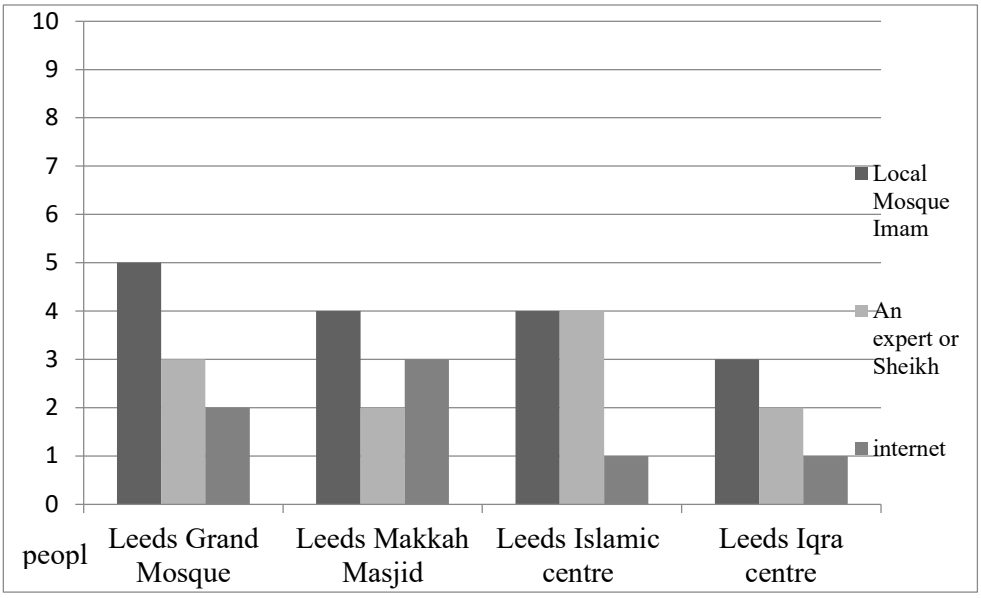
[4] Wael b. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 179.

[5] Jacques Waardenburg, *Islam: Historical, Social, and Political Perspectives* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 387.

century the ʿulamāʾ had to challenge with massive advancements in print media, communication and western educational system backed by the governments. As a result, lay interpreters have emerged leading to further fragmentations and individualisation in religious authority.[6] The latter issue is felt more acutely among the migrant Muslim communities in non-Muslim countries, especially in Europe.[7]

Considering that kind of individualisation, this research was planned to discover the tendency among young Sunnī Muslims live in Britain in seeking religious authority. The below graph (Table 1) demonstrates the choices among a small sample of lay persons within the congregation in the selected mosques in Leeds when they need to consult a religious expert.

Table 1: Patterns of religious authority for Sunnī Muslim informants in Leeds.



Above data has been collected from the interviewees responding to that question: Who/what do you consult when you come across any problem regarding faith and practice? It can be concluded from this table that easy access to religious authority makes imāms are in advance of the others. This proves that mosque imāms are found on the front line of religious authority for the congregation. Although imām profiles and qualifications show quite variations,[8] they are

6 Francis Robinson, 'Crisis of Authority: Crisis of Islam?', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 19 (2009), 349.

7 Frank Peter, 'Individualization and Religious Authority in Western European Islam.', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 17/1 (no date), 105–106.

8 Lewis, *Bradford's Muslim Communities and the Reproduction and Representation of Islam*; Barton, *The Bengali Muslims of Bradford: A Study of Their Observance of Islam with Special Reference to the Function of the Mosque and the Work of the İmām.*; Philip Lewis, *The Functions, Education and Influence of the 'Ulama in Bradford's Muslim Communities* (Leeds: Leeds University Phamplets, 1996).

generally leaders of the Muslim community providing guidance in the observance of religion. In seeking religious authority, an expert or shaykh comes as second. However, unlike mosque imāms, religious expert is not available all the time around the mosque. Finally, the internet has a special importance for young Muslims in seeking religious advice since its easy and quick access. Nonetheless, it is at least preferable source among the interviewees except in LMM. It is beneficial to evaluate and give more information about these three patterns by unpacking them in order.

2.1. Mosque Imāms in Leeds

In Islam, the first masjid was established by the Prophet Muḥammad, who led prayers and gave religious education to his companions. When the borders of Islamic state spread into wider locations, the prophet sent some of his friends to these areas in order to guide and teach the observance of religion. Later on, the ʿulamāʾ with its various components took an active role in religious guidance. The term imām, as the most common post associated with the ʿʿulamāʾ, has been used for both religious and political leadership in Islam since its inception.[9] However, nowadays the meaning of imām in Sunnī milieu is generally confined to lead prayers within the mosque. The term imām is synonymously used in different cultures, such as "shaykh" in the Arab world; "molla, mawlā, mawlānā, maulvī, khari[qārī], and munshī"[10] in the Indian subcontinent and Afghanistan; and "hoca or imām-hatip"[11] in Turkey and the Balkans. İmām basically leads prayers (five times in a day, friday, and two feasts) and delivers sermons (khuṭba) in relevant prayers. Additionally, the imām may teach Islamic sciences (tafsīr, ḥadīth, fiqh, etc.) based on his competency in such sciences and transmits his knowledge to the next generations.

In the British context, the role and functions of an imām can be summed up thus: he leads the congregational prayers including the five daily, Friday, two feast prayers (ʿīd al-fiṭr and ʿīd al-aḍḥā), and tarawih at nights during the holy month of Ramaḍān; additionally, he gives sermons on friday prayers for every week and twice in a year (feast prayers). Furthermore, he carries out other religious services including marriage contract (nikāḥ) and funeral ceremony, and serves as a mentor in divorce and family matters as well as any other social conflicts. He is also engaged in teaching courses inside and outside the mosque. These varry from Qurʾān circles to essential knowledge classes in the observance of religion. Potential attendees are consisted of both children and adults. In addition to this, the imām preaches somewhere like hospitals, schools, and prisons outside the mosque. Occasionally, the imām involves in community events such as giving

[9] Wilfred Madelung, "İmāmate", *Encyclopaedia of Religion* (USA: Thomson Gale, no date).

[10] Barton, *The Bengali Muslims of Bradford*, 112.

[11] Mustafa Sabri Küçükaşcı, "İmam", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 2000).

seminars and delivering speeches accordingly.[12] Considering all these together, as regards as religious belief and practice is concerned imāms in Britain have a crucial role as 'religious authority' at the local level and, great impact on the congregation to divert. In the following paragraphs I shall introduce the imāms of the selected mosques in order to delve into more details in that role.

Initially, imām of the LMM whose name is ʿĀṣim, originally coming from Pakistan but has British citizenship. He has succeeded in his late father's position in the mosque, though he is a solicitor by profession. Having memorised the whole Qurʾān by heart (*hafiz*) in his childhood, he defines himself belonging to 'Barēlwī' tradition. Not only does İmām ʿĀṣim effectively use mosque landscape in organising multifaceted organisations for instance interfaith dialogue activities, but he also appears on satellite television speeches and discussions on the Ummah Channel. He is good at using English as medium, while the Barēlwī ʿulamāʾ generally prefer to speak in Urdu. He is also one of the leading members of the Mosques and İmāms National Advisory Board (MINAB)[13], an umbrella organisation established in 2006. In 2012, he was awarded the MBE honour by the Queen, for his local and national level initiatives[14], since, for example, according to one of the national broadcasting news channels:

> After the 7/7 terrorist atrocities, he was the first İmām to hold an open day at his Mosque to engage the community on preventing extremism and Islamophobia, despite a lot of opposition by many people in his community to this initiative.[15]

With the above characteristics, İmām ʿĀṣim projects an exceptional image when we consider the common profile of Britain's mosque imāms, especially those who migrated from the Indian subcontinent. The below expression from a young British-born Muslim from the congregation, Shahsat (a 25-year-old), who lived in Bristol and Birmingham before coming to Leeds, supports that:

> Many communities have imāms who do not speak in English and whom many youngsters cannot understand, but in Leeds Makkah Masjid, al-ḥamdu li-llāh [praise be to Allāh], the imām speaks Arabic, Urdu, English; he is in touch with the Muslim community, he is in touch with the local community, and wider society (interviewed on 10 February 2011).

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12 Barton, *The Bengali Muslims of Bradford*, 111–116; Lewis, *The Functions, Education and Influence of the 'Ulama in Bradford's Muslim Communities*, 114.

13 The MINAB is an advisory and facilitator body providing services to mosques and Islamic training institutions in the UK. See more at www.minab.org.uk

14 Leeds Makkah Masjid/ LMM/ http://www.makkahmasjid.co.uk/wp/index.php/2012/06/16/imām-qari-asim-awarded-mbe-by-the-queen/ (20 June 2012)

15 http://www.itv.com/news/calendar/2012-06-16/queens-birthday-honours/ (20 June 2012)

İmām ʿĀṣim holds both religious and community leadership. For the former, among the LMM's attendees, he is seen as a religious authority in terms of religious belief and practices. Generally, if they have a problem in any issue as regards their religion, they initially consult the imām. If they ask advice of any other sources, such as primary books of the religion, and the internet, they need to hear an approval or more details from the imām. Consequently, the imām is found at centre for religious authority for them. İmām ʿĀṣim reflects that from an insider's perspective:

> Asking local imāms is a good thing, since at the end of the day even if they consulted everyone else [more expert scholars] they [will] still consult the local imāms because they do not know when asking others whether the answer they are given [will] actually fit in with how they practice the rest of the things [whether they practice whatever they say or not] (Interviewed on 27 March 2011).

It can be understood from the above quote that the affinity of lay Muslims and the local mosque imām, from the aspect of knowing each other mutually, is a vital factor for the reliability of fatwā. This mutual rapport can be explained as such: for the imām when giving his personal advice (fatwā) he regards the situation of the inquirer; on the side of ordinary Muslim, when taking fatwā he/she is pleasantly relaxed because of the familiarity with the imām. In addition, the reliability comes to front as a matter as regards to how imām actually practices in his daily life. It must not be a contradiction between the word and action. For instance, if an imām gives an advice to an ordinary Muslim not to invest money into gamble or luck games but he does them for his own benefit, the ordinary person does not rely on that ruling.

During my interview with imām ʿĀṣim, I asked him: "In what matters do other Muslims consult you to get a fatwā?" He acknowledges that questions are primarily on belief and rituals, then family, and then social and financial matters.

> Faith and practice is mainly in the mosque about prayer, the main issues are about how to pray. People generally ask questions about performing the rituals. For example, if someone is late and misses one or two rakʿas [parts] from the fard [obligatory] prayer, what is it that the person needs to do? Whereas people who are not regular attendees in this mosque ask generally about faith matters such as shafā'atu awliyāʾullāh [intercession of the friends of Allāh, a common belief among Ṣūfī-Barēlwī followers[16]].

Indeed, it is a great opportunity for someone to ask questions about the above Barēlwī practice and get first-hand information from the imām. This statement is also significant in

[16] See for more information on Lewis, *Bradford's Muslim Communities and the Reproduction and Representation of Islam*, 83; Geaves, *Sectarian Influences Within Islam in Britain with Reference to the Concepts of 'Ummah' and 'Community'*, 95.

demonstrating a controversial issue among Muslims in Britain. In the British context, some other issues such as social and financial questions may arise: 'Can we sit at the same table while people are drinking alcohol?' or 'Is someone's income purely halal if he is a taxi driver and carries drunken people or has a shop and sells alcohol?' İmām ʿĀṣim reported that he had directed Muslims (who asked these questions about halal income) to spend their profits (after their living expenses) either by going on the hajj (pilgrimage) or giving sadaqa (charity). He also announces that at the time he gives fatāwā, he gains from consulting the Fatāwā Riḍāwiyya (30 volumes) composed by Aḥmad Riḍā Barēlwī (d. 1921).

Secondly, another imām to be introduced here is Shaykh Muḥammad Taher. He is the main imām of Leeds Grand Mosque (LGM), which has more cosmopolitan congregation, mostly consisted of Arab communities. He is from Libya and holds British citizenship. He is well-known for his beautiful Qurʾān recitation around Leeds that makes many international students and youth to attend the congregation in order to listen to him. He calls himself as a shaykh or scholar and refers to his being an imām "as an employee position in the mosque". At the time of writing that paper he was a PhD candidate in Islamic law at the University of Leeds. Like imām ʿĀṣim, he memorised the Holy Qurʾān in early ages during his teenage. In addition, he gained traditional religious education and qualifications in his home county. Inside the mosque he often prefers to speak in Arabic, but occasionally he addresses on some issues, such as errors in the fulfilments of religious practices, with the medium of English. He also organises some seminars and gives talks in English, specifically in study circles targeted international students and recently converted Muslims. Having best qualification in reciting the Holy Qurʾān, he gives tajwīd classes (reading and reciting the holy book according to certain rules) to both adults and children on Friday evenings. Unlike İmām ʿĀṣim, he is not actively involved in interfaith activities as there is another person, Dr. Hasan al-Katib, who is in charge of those activities on the mosque committee.[17] If shaykh Taher is not available around the mosque, shaykh Abdullah al-Judai or Dr. Hasan lead al-jumʿa prayers and deliver sermons.

Additionally, shaykh Taher is present in his office at 6pm-7pm from Monday to Friday, to answer any queries in religious matters on the telephone, or via an online query form. This is barely the case if he is not asked face to face after the congregational prayers. Therefore, the existence of a repudiated ʿālim at the LGM, Shaykh Abdullah al-Judai, makes Shaykh Muḥammad's job easier, since the former has expertise on giving fatwā and personal opinions on current religious issues. He is in the post of official muftī of the LGM. In consulting and getting information on a particular religious matter, mosque attendees tend to ask first Shaykh al-Judai, and then to

[17] At the time of writing, a new committee of the mosque has appointed Dr. Zunaid Karim for this role. See http://www.leedsgrandmosque.com/mosque/staff.asp (20 June 2012)

Shaykh Taher if the former is absent. Shaykh Taher claims that "fatwā is a big thing, and I am not giving a fatwā, I am trying to answer [basic] questions and find solutions". Haroon, a 30-year-old PhD candidate from Jordan, states:

> When I had some problems about religious beliefs and practices, especially different implementations like prayer timetables, I went to the Grand Mosque and found answers to my questions. I think Shaykh Muḥammad is very knowledgeable as a scholar (3 February 2011).

Shaykh Taher reports that he is consulted mainly on religious faith and practices, as well as family relations. He maintains:

> Regarding beliefs and practices, people ask questions about mistakes in ṣalāt, and some misunderstandings about religious rituals. For example, a brother asked me about joining two prayers [ḍhuhr and 'aṣr] during winter. Another one asked me about different madhāhib in fiqh [Ḥanafiyya, Shāfiʿiyya, Mālikiyya, and Ḥanbaliyya] when he noticed different implementations in the mosque (31 May 2011).

Shaykh Taher told me that in such situations he is not issuing a fatwā, but rather commenting on the situation according to the limits of his knowledge. Furthermore, he asserts that to issue a fatwā is a crucial matter requiring an expertise in the field, which is more appropriate to someone, for instance like Shaykh al-Judai. In the context of Britain, according to Shaykh Taher, it is extremely essential for someone with his expertise to determine and publish new authoritative rulings in order to fill the gap in minority fiqh.

Thirdly, turning to the Iqra Centre (IC), İmām Rashed is from Pakistani ethnic origin and holds British citizenship. İmām Rashed is 45 years old, and has lived in Britain for the last 15 years. He is a hafiz, as are the other imāms mentioned above. He completed traditional religious education in Pakistan and moved to Britain in order to serve the United Kingdom Islamic Mission (UKIM) as an imām or religious teacher in its centres across Britain. After completing a postgraduate study, an MA programme in Islamic studies from Birmingham University, he was appointed as the main imām of the Moortown-based IC.

İmām Rashed is unique amongst the Sunnī imāms in Leeds in terms of using English in Friday sermons (al-jumʿa khuṭba). He merely recites some verses from the Holy Qurʾān and sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad (ḥadīth) in Arabic, whereas the main part of his sermon is delivered in English. When I asked him about that, he replied:

> It should be [so] in every mosque. We live here in Britain, and sometimes, the young generation does not understand what the sermons are about, and even we have here Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds. Hence, we should use English to deliver our sermons and preachings so as to enable the message of khuṭba to be understood (22 April 2012).

İmām Rashed also teaches basic Islamic knowledge as well as Arabic alphabet to children so that they can read the Qurʾān and pray properly. There is a supplementary school courses during weekdays after formal school hours and at weekends in the IC. In the mosque, he gives tajwīd and tafsīr classes for adults, too. As in the case with the other imāms mentioned above, İmām Rashed is the first point to be applied for religious and moral questions, mainly concerning family matters. At the IC, someone else deals with inter-faith activities, thus İmām Rashed is responsible for only the main duties of an imām.

İmām Rashed reported that topics he is consulted generally concern belief and rituals, as well as family matters. For example, he states:

> A day before someone asked me about the women, is it permissible to use make-up things, or cut their hair? Why should a woman be obedient to her husband, what is the religious aspect of that? People also ask relevant questions about living in a modern age. For example, can a woman pray while she has worn make-up, and put on perfume? ...In social life, can Muslims give salām [greetings] to non-Muslims, or how should Muslims deal with them, to the extent that they have to mix with them?

İmām Rashed encourages the mosque attendees on the integration of Muslim community into British society that is why he uses the medium of English in his sermons and talks. He states that "I am not giving a fatwā, just expressing my opinions about the questions." As far as social life is concerned, he asserts that "representation of Islam in Britain is very weak and Muslims need to act." For imām Rashed, living in a non-Muslim country is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate Islam to non-Muslims, and the purpose of the establishment UKIM is in this vein as a "da'wa enterprise".[18]

Final example to be given here as imām is Mawlānā Yousef. He is a British-born young man and the ex-imām of Leeds Islamic Centre (LIC). He is a graduate from Dewsbury Dār al-ʿUlūm, a Deobandī type of school established in a small town nearby Leeds. I tried to make an interview with the current imām of LIC, but I received negative response in participating this research as an informant. Thus, I could find a chance to make an interview with the ex-imām of LIC, Mawlānā Yousef. He was selected for the Dār al-ʿUlūm in Dewsbury after a long process of examination, and he completed the famous 18th-century Indian syllabus, the "dars-i niẓāmī"[19] eventually finding himself as imām in the largest Deobandī - Tablīghī Jamā'at masjid in Leeds. While fulfilling the

[18] Lewis, *Bradford's Muslim Communities and the Reproduction and Representation of Islam*; Barton, *The Bengali Muslims of Bradford*; Lewis, *The Functions, Education and Influence of the 'Ulama in Bradford's Muslim Communities*.

[19] Lewis, *Bradford's Muslim Communities and the Reproduction and Representation of Islam*, 135; Geaves, *Sectarian Influences Within Islam in Britain with Reference to the Concepts of 'Ummah' and 'Community'*, 148.

imāmate position in LIC, he completed two Master's degrees, one in Healthcare and the other in Islamic sciences and Arabic literature in Leeds University.

By contrast to the other three imāms introduced above, Mawlānā Yousef is self-confident in describing himself as an ʿālim. He is currently not an official in the mosque, but teaches the Qurʾān and Islamic knowledge to children in the supplementary school of LIC. Sometimes, he visits local schools in Harehills in order to teach Islamic classes by appointment from the local authorities. According to him, in the eyes of ordinary Muslims belong to Deobandī movement, graduates from religious seminars (Dār al-ʿUlūms) have an expertise in Islamic sciences and they can potentially interpret the sources of Islam to implement to current situation in Britain.

It is essential here to mention the role of official imāms of the Islamic centre. There are two imāms in turn leading the prayers and delivering sermons on Friday prayers. Furthermore, one imām weekly gives tafsīr classes in Urdu followed by noon (ḍhuhr) prayers on Saturdays and Sundays. However, neither of these gives any Qurʾān classes to attendees in the mosque, while some elders voluntarily help others who want to develop their recitation of the Qurʾān. It might be resulted from the imāms' overwork in teaching involvements in the supplementary school of the mosque, just like Mawlānā Yousef.

To sum up, imāms in Leeds are found at the very centre of the exercise of everyday religious authority since they involve in the daily life of mosques and their congregations. Mosque attendees usually prefer to go to firstly local imām, even if not always being the most qualified. Although they mostly meet the expectation of the immigrant Muslims, it is difficult to say so for British-born Muslims. Because these young generation think that imāms should lecture and teach in English as well as producing new legal rulings as the British context required. The imāms in Leeds depending on their attributes, as elsewhere in Britain, get involved in more social roles within the society compared to Muslim countries.[20]

Interfaith, youth, and social work services are sometimes carried out by people who are not imāms, although it is true, too, that some imāms in the UK are beginning to couple their religious studies with professional training oriented to chaplaincy and other areas of public ministry as an imām. Nonetheless, overall, various conditions including the rapid growth of a very youthful community, issues around proficiency in English, modern methods[21] and the willingness of mosque committees to employ well-qualified British imāms who are paid accordingly, together with socio-economic factors[22] and the overall social capital of some segments of the community

[20] Birt, J. and Lewis, P., "The Pattern of Islamic Reform in Britain: The Deobandis between Intra-Muslim Sectarianism and Engagement with Wider Society", 101.

[21] Lewis, *The Functions, Education and Influence of the 'Ulama in Bradford's Muslim Communities*, 112.

[22] Barton, *The Bengali Muslims of Bradford*, 122.

should be considered as other reasons why the influence of mosque imāms has been somewhat circumscribed in the British context.[23]

As reflected above, mosque imāms in Leeds mostly fulfil the main functions of an imām despite having some different skills and abilities promulgated by ethnic and sectarian cultures. İmām Rashed's full English usage and teaching method are very influential in delivering the message to young and multicultural British societies. Shaykh Taher both serves a cosmopolitan migrant community and convert Muslims with his traditional way of delivering the sermons and his appealing to recite the Qurʾān beautifully. Mawlānā Yousef concentrates more on children's education at the supplementary school adjacent to the mosque. However, İmām Qārī ʿĀṣim combines both religious authority and community leadership with himself, and uses mixed languages (Urdu and English) to communicate with his society. His engagement with the various segments of local society (youth, and non-Muslims) has brought some fruits albeit in local scale. Overall, the imāms introduced above as being the nerve point of religious authority, provide religious guidance with regard to religious beliefs and practices in the context of Britain. The easy access to and availability of the imāms at least five times a day make it the first preference of ordinary Muslims to consult the imāms. Thus, Leeds's imāms have become a crucial factor in directing the socio-religious life of Muslims in the city.

2.2. Religious Experts

As religious authorities for Sunnī Muslims in Leeds, religious experts have a special importance in terms of issuing religious rulings and guidance. The lack of religious experts in the city, they come as second to be asked some religious questions. Here, I introduce two Muslim scholars repudiated with their rulings around Leeds whose names are Abdullah al-Judai and Mawlānā Abdullah. The former works officially as a muftī of the LGM, where he conducts a tafsīr (Qurʾānic exegesis) class weekly, whereas the latter, who is involved in Deobandī movement, gives seminars or conferences in the LIC. These two scholars not only serve as religious authority on Muslims in Leeds with its diverse ethnic and sectarian communities, but they are also very famous at national level. The aim of this section is to propose a case study of how each of these two scholars are concerned with a particular problem of Muslims in Leeds, and to examine their positions as religious authorities for the Muslim community. Although I tried to make an interview with these two scholars, it did not happen due to their busy schedules. Instead of this, I report here my observation during their talks and classes in relevant mosques.

Shaykh al-Judai is originally from Iraq where he gained a traditional Islamic education in Basra, the southern province of Iraq. He is interested deeply in the ḥadīth studies and wrote

[23] Birt, "Good İmām, Bad İmām: Civic Religion and National Integration in Britain Post-9/11", 688–690.

several books. He engaged in some teaching activities in the Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq and Kuwait. In the late 1980s, he migrated to the UK, where he has maintained his research and teaching. Having served as its general secretary from 1998-2000, he is one of the leading members of the European Council for Fatwā and Research (ECFR). Living in Leeds, he is the director of the Islamic Research Centre, where he supervises studies on Islamic sciences, particularly Ḥadīth studies.[24] Thus, he serves as a consultant in Islamic fiqh for the LGM at the local level. On the other hand, at national level, his signature is found at the bottom of a number of fatāwā related to religious life of Sunnī Muslims in the context of Britain. For instance, combining two prayers, such as noon (ḍhuhr) and afternoon (ʻaṣr) in the winter season is only one of his well-known personal opinions (fatāwā).

After giving this short biography about Shaykh al-Judai, it is worth to mention about his role at the LGM. On Monday evenings after observing `ishā prayer with the congregation, he gives a lecture series called *ḥalaqātu't-tafsīr*. The attendance to this class is roughly about 25-30 people, including regular attendees in the mosque and some elites including academics, doctors, university students, and so on. The language used in the lecture is Arabic since the majority of the attendees are ethnically from Arab backgrounds. The lecture generally focuses on either a passage from the Qurʾān or the sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad, and this takes at least one hour. Then, a question-and-answer section follows this exposition. Finally, the session is ended up with a supplication prayer (dua). At this point, I am going to share a fatwā issued by al-Judai in the British context that has had influence mainly upon the practice of the LGM's congregation, and some other Sunnī Muslims in the IC, which belongs to UKIM's perspective and shares a reformist outlook with LGM despite its Pakistani origin.

Al-Judai issued a fatwā in 1995, about the permissibility of combining two of prayers in daily basis. He advocated that in Britain the exact time of `ishā prayer is delayed nearly until midnight during summer season:

> It is true that Islam strongly encourages that the prayer be performed on time and the basic rule is that the rulings for the times of the prayers have been made clear and that through these rulings the time of each prayer can be known by certain signs. The time of Eisha for example does not begin until the red twilight disappears from the sky. And so, according to Islamic law if the red twilight doesn't disappear until twelve o'clock at night then the time of Eisha doesn't start until that time (capitals and transliteration in original).[25]

[24] See his own autobiographical notes (in Arabic) http://muntada.islamtoday.net/t37387.html (23 November 2011).

[25] http://www.leedsgrandmosque.com/services/fatwā-eisha.asp (11 October 2010).

It can be understood from the above quote that there is merely a couple of hours between the time of `ishā and fajr (dawn of next day) prayers, so this causes an obstacle for Muslims in Britain. As a result, in case Muslims wait to pray after midnight, there would be a short time for the dawn prayer. Sleeping and re-waking up in a short time is obviously risky as well as difficult for those who have to get up early in the mornings in terms of adjusting their rest time in a sufficient way. Consequently, al-Judai offers a solution for Muslims in British context by combining two prayers. He establishes a correlation with the examples from the life of Prophet Muḥammad by showing in what circumstances the Prophet joined the two prayers. During pilgrimage the Prophet did so, even without any certain reason, he occasionally combined two prayers when he was in Medina in order to show a gateway for his followers. Thus, al-Judai claims that:

> Joining two prayers because of need is acceptable and permitted and this is the most correct position of the scholars and it is what the provision of concessions within the religion dictates - the joining of either of the two prayers with the other at either of the two times, for example joining Maghrib with Eisha at the time of Eisha or joining Eisha with Maghrib at the time of Maghrib (capitals and transliteration in original).[26]

This fatwā is vitally important in contributing to the need of Muslim community in Britain. Joining two prayers makes daily life easier for British Muslims at the same time staying in the allowance of Islamic law. Some of university students attending LGM, affirmed that they were also combining ḍhuhr and ‘aṣr when exams coincide with prayer times. They were mainly followers of Hanafî fiqh. For them, if they do not combine two prayers, one will most likely be missed. Muḥammad, a 24-year-old and a regular attendee at the IC, says, “Yes, combining two prayers is unusual but is a sunna of the Prophet, whose implementation is well-known”. Furthermore, he maintains that in the British context, time shortage is really difficult to organise daily life: “Muslim communities in Leeds might have different understanding about that, but in this masjid (the IC) we prayed by combining two prayers. It is [something that produces] easiness for us.” Another ordinary Muslim from a Ṣūfī-Barēlwī background, Jaweed (a 21-year-old university student), states: “If you know what you are doing, there is no problem. Several occasions, I combined or joined.”

As a result, most of the LGM attendees and some other Muslims agree that it is better to combine two prayers than to miss one. Similar examples are found in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and some possible scenarios in Islamic law prove that it is not against to Islamic law.

[26] This *fatwā* was initially found published on the notice board in Leeds Grand Mosque in 2009. Since then an electronic copy has been posted on the website of the mosque. See http://www.leedsgrandmosque.com/services/fatwā-eisha.asp (11 October 2010)

Therefore, it makes it easier and provides the British Muslims with flexibility. Hence, attendees in LGM implement this fatwā in combining ḍhuhr and "aṣr prayers in winter season, and maghrib and `ishā prayers in summer season. LGM arranges its prayer times accordingly, thus it reflects that Shaykh al-Judai is an important figure as a religious authority for Muslims in terms of interpreting the sources and applying to the context of Britain.

The other example needs to be detailed here is Mawlānā Abdullah. He is originally from Pakistan and is closely associated himself with the Bury (Dār al-ʿUlūm).

There is barely any information about his biography to be accessed openly in public, though he has a personal website, and commonly appears in the media.[27] As a senior lecturer, he teaches the Ḥadīth in the seminary of Bury (Dār al-ʿUlūm). He also travels across Britain by giving seminars and conferences on the current issues that challenge Muslims in Britain. He has given both written and audio-video responses to a number of questions, from the status of women to the place of tawassul (supplicating Allāh through an intermediary), and sometimes his speeches can be listened live on the internet. I shall now discuss one of his speeches on a topic closely related to the issue of religious authority, "following a particular madhab, school of law" in the contemporary world at a time when taqlīd (imitation, following a madhab) has been questioned by some reformist approaches.

In LIC, there are frequent speeches and lecturers given by the visiting Deobandī ʿulamāʾ. On 12 December 2010, there was a seminar programme named "The legacy of İmām Abū Ḥanīfa and following a particular madhab" delivered by two important Deobandī ʿulamāʾ. Both scholars primarily focused on the essentiality of lay Muslims in following a school of law (madhab), the Ḥanafiyya in particular since it is common among Pakistani Muslims. The first speaker advocated the legacy and methodology of the Ḥanafī school of law. The second speaker was Mawlānā Abdullah that he put forward some explanations for the necessity of following a particular madhab. He began his speech by greeting the attendees in Urdu, then continued in English, outlining what he was going to talk about:

> Why is it important or essential to follow a madhab? I will try to explain that to you by using three reasons: because following a madhab is easier, it is safer, and billions of people who have followed a school of law since the second century of the Islamic calendar cannot be wrong.

[27] His personal website is www.halaldawarecords.com' and occasionally talks about current issues on 'Ḥanafī fiqh Channel'.

The speaker established a ground for his justification by giving some certain verses from the Qurʾān and ḥadīths, and then made an emphasis on the place of İmām Abū Ḥanīfa (d.150/767) in terms of introducing the methodology of jurisprudence (uṣūl al-fiqh), saying:

> When İmām Abū Hanīfa saw that people were interpreting things differently, he developed uṣūl al-fiqh, in a methodology stating that if something comes from the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth, they are upon my ra's and ʿayn [lit.head and eye means acceptable]; and if there is nothing in the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth, look at the usage of companions, ijmāʿ [consensus]; and if not there, use qiyās [analogy]. So these are the rules taken out [through] masail [topics] from the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth. Today many masāʾil [problems] are not in the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth, so we have to use analogy to derive rules from the sources. For example, drugs are not mentioned in the Qurʾān, or the Ḥadīth, but they, just like alcohol, intoxicate human consciousness, so it is ḥaram [forbidden] when we make analogy. As a result you do not need to do research, leave it to the ʿulamāʾ since it is easier for you. Otherwise, you must memorise the Qurʾān, and the Ḥadīth, know Arabic very well, have deep knowledge in methodology [uṣūl]... it is easier for you to follow a school of law. It is also safer, because we do not have ikhlāṣ [sincerity] and taqwā [piety] like the first three generations had. That is why it is safer for us to follow a madhāb...so you should trust the ʿulamāʾ that deal with the masāʾil, and follow whatever they update in fiqh according to day and age.

According to him, the early legal jurists with their piety and religiosity worked hard for the benefit of the Muslim community.[28] In addition, Mawlānā supported his stand by quoting a verse from the Qurʾān[29] that says, "Obey Allāh, and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority", and he interpreted the last element of this verse, referring to "those of you who are in authority" as "ʿulamāʾ, not political rulers. For Mawlānā Abdullah, the four pioneer imāms and their pupils made research upon research, and established schools of law. Then he re-emphasised the importance and safety of following the ʿulamāʾ on matters religious life concerned:

> Today, people must be confident in the ʿulamāʾ that have done research for the Muslim community. It is safer for you to follow because you will be asked in the day of judgement: did you have ability to research from the Qurʾān and the Sunna, or did you do research out of your own intention and for your own benefit, especially in this era. I do not trust myself because I do not have ikhlāṣ and taqwā, so I am following a madhāb, and Muslims should trust their ʿulamāʾ and follow a school of law.

Mawlānā Abdullah continued his speech by pointing out the importance of following a madhāb, regardless of whether it is Ḥanafī, Shāfiʿī, Mālikī, or Ḥanbalī. Otherwise, the ordinary Muslims may interpret sources in an incorrect direction. Whether it is allegedly or not they may

[28] Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*, 204.

[29] Qur'ān: 4/ 59

understand the sources based on their own logic and for their own benefit. Consequently, lay interpreters can destroy religious life that is at risk by secular and material threats.

The presenter then asked the audience to ask their questions written on a piece of paper so that Mawlānā could arrange them and answer accordingly. Then, Mawlānā began to read some questions and referred to his website in which he had already responded in detail in order not to waste further time. He replied to some questions, which are in rare. For instance, "is it lawful or permissible to transit from one madhab to another, for example, in the act of combining two prayers?" He answered as follows:

> Yes, if you have ikhlāṣ, taqwā, and if necessary, you can do that, but you must have knowledge about both schools of law...for instance, in the India-Pakistan partition in 1947, many husbands disappeared. According to Ḥanafiyya, a wife must wait for her husband till such time as he reaches the age of 90, to marry somebody else or distribute his property. For instance, if a man disappeared when he was 70, the wife must wait 20 years for that to happen. The ʿulamāʾ gathered and decided to use the fatwā of İmām Malik that a wife has to wait for 4 years. After this period, she can distribute his estate and can marry another person. Because of the extreme necessity, the ʿulamāʾ agreed on that fatwā.

Mawlānā gave more details by saying "You can completely change your madhab from one to another", and he gave some examples from well-known sources in Islamic law, such as Ibn Abidin and Tahawi. However, he warned the audience "If you take something from one madhab, one from another, and one from others, you will invalidate your prayers". He explained this through a scenario in which, if somebody follows the Ḥanafī school of law, and his wife follows the Shāfiʿī, (in the former school, bleeding from any part of the body breaks wudu' or ablution, but for the latter it does not) and if this person intermittently changes his madhab from one to another, he invalidates his prayers. Touching women breaks wudu' for a man according to the Shāfiʿī, but for the Ḥanafī it does not. Take the case of a person who comes home and kisses his wife and says, "Oh, my wudu' is not broken according to Ḥanafiyya", and then he notices that his finger is bleeding for some reason, and he says, "Oh, my wudu' is not broken according to Shāfiʿīyya". In both situations, his prayer is invalid since his ablution is broken. "As a result, you cannot pick and choose on the basis of your own 'aql or logic, for the ʿulamāʾ have to decide this, not you as a lay person," states the shaykh at the end of his explanation.

It is useful to mention here that he gave an advice to the audience in order to read and get knowledge from a book entitled 'Bahishti Zewar' or 'Heavenly Ornaments', when he was asked "Should the public read some books about the authenticity of aḥādīth [plural of ḥadīth]?" Mawlānā also emphasised the importance of the ʿulamāʾ as a traditional religious authority for ordinary Muslims in what follows:

> As with other worldly matters, leave these issues to the scholars of Islam. For example, if you are ill, you will go to a doctor, or if your car is broken, you will go to a mechanic. Similarly, if you have a problem in understanding a mas'alā [topic or matter] go to a qualified scholar and ask. If you take a strong medicine without consulting a doctor, you may kill yourself. For the religion, it is the same, and you may put your faith in danger by dealing with any religious matter in which you do not have enough proficiency.

As it is implied in the above quote that some Muslims, especially with reformist tendencies, tend to look a resource and interpret some passages in order to resolve a religious problem. However, to attempt this must require a certain competency in Islamic sciences. Mawlānā's general advice to ordinary Muslims fits to the characteristics of the Deobandī tradition which emerged in the 1860s in India, and aimed to restore the 'ʿulamā'' position within the society in challenging with modernity and modernist critiques. Studying religious issues and offer solutions (derive rulings) is the job of religious experts, according to the Mawlānā.

In brief, both Shaykh al-Judai and Mawlānā Abdullah engage with the current religious matters in the daily life of Sunnī Muslims in Britain. The impact of Shaykh al-Judai as a religious authority on the attendees of the LGM can be seen in local level, and to what extent more broadly amongst Arab and reformist communities via the ECFR in the UK and Europe. The practice of joining two prayers elaborated above can be given as an example to that. Mawlānā Abdullah, as mentioned above, teaches in one of the leading religious seminaries (Dār al-ʿUlūm) of Deobandī movement in Britain. The graduates from such schools are generally appointed to the imāmate positions in the mosques and schools throughout the UK[30] as is in the case of Mawlānā Yousef, and they disperse what they have learnt from their tutors to more broadly. Thus, Mawlānā Abdullah always encourages ordinary Muslims to rely on the rulings and efforts of the ʿulamāʾ in religious matters, which signals more of a traditionalist position.

2.3. The Internet

In the age of easy access to information, the Internet is a common research tool for not only ordinary but also experts Muslims.[31] In the daily life of Muslims, it has a significant importance in terms of on-line fatāwā and discourses about religious life. Nonetheless, it does not provide the close relationships of personal trust, as existed in the communication with a religious expert or an imām's face-to-face advice. All the four mosques focused in this study have websites that enable communication with their congregations by announcing important events, prayer timetables, and so on. In addition to this, these websites display religious rulings (fatwā) in a

[30] Birt, J. and Lewis, P., "The Pattern of Islamic Reform in Britain: The Deobandis between Intra-Muslim Sectarianism and Engagement with Wider Society", 101–106.

[31] G.R. Bunt, *IMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam* (USA: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

specific place or in the section of frequently asked questions (FAQs), as well as providing links to other websites issue fatāwā. This facility provides a kind of privacy for Muslims, both male and female, to raise questions varying from sexual relations to menstruation. In fact, a virtual source of advice on certain topics can sometimes be welcomed.

Table 1 shows that some ordinary Muslims research religious rulings and resolutions on the Internet. In his book called 'iMuslims', Bunt claims "the extension of Internet-technology access is opening up new markets for specific forms of religious authority, challenging norms"[32]. However, the Internet itself is obviously not a type of religious authority, but a medium. In the end, it comes from a religious scholar or muftī that web researchers get the fatwā they seek.

Therefore, according to my research participants some issues should be considered in seeking religious guidance on the Internet. Knowledge pollution and un-reliable information can be given as examples here. A male British-born university student named Farhad (a 23-year-old) states, "if you know the website's reliability, then you look at it, otherwise there are lots of websites and information that may confuse you, even you go astray" (interviewed on February 2, 2011). Furthermore, another young Muslim named Arshad (27), a driver instructor attending the LIC, says that:

> I think we should only consult a website which we know about, because people claim themselves as Muslims and give rulings on a website, but they are not. ...If I know a website and the ruling is straightforward, I might not speak to a scholar. But, most of the time I consult a religious expert because, you know, the fatāwā can differ from people to people depending on their situations (interviewed on 18 April 2011).

Easy access to the Internet in Britain, encourages many lay Muslims to seek religious rulings or opinions online. My informants referred to some well-known websites' addresses, such as www.al-huda.com, www.askimām.com, www.Sunnipath.com, www.al-islam.com, and www.islamonline.net. The four mosque websites have links to other websites for more information: for instance, the LGM refers to www.e-cfr.org/en/ (the ECFR); the LMM to www.Sunnipath.com; the LIC to www.central-mosque.com; and the IC to www.ukim.org/dawah/askimām.

Conclusion

This article has examined the role of ʿulamāʾs religious authority in the life of Sunnī Muslims in Leeds. Four biggest mosques of the city were chosen in conducting fieldwork study. In the abundance of community-based religious authority for Muslims, who are diverse in terms of

[32] G.R Bunt, *Virtually Islamic: Computer-Mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), 113.

ethnic and sectarian terms, it makes consequently religious authorities various. Thus, it is definitely impossible to refer to one single religious authority for all Muslims in Britain. Instead of this, religious authority has become pluralised and localised as confirmed by different segments of the Muslim community. According to my findings gained case studies in the selected mosques, mosque imāms are found on the frontline and the centre of ordinary Muslims as religious authority. Personal intimacies with the local mosque imām or religious expert on how religious rulings may be applicable to a Muslim's life are crucial factors in getting religious advice and confirming religious authority.

Those ʿulamāʾ who have proficiency in Islamic law and other relevant sciences can operate the process of updating and issuing unique authoritative interpretations, as in the case of Shaykh al-Judai, whose fatwā on joining two prayers is a vital effort to contribute to 'minority fiqh' in the British context. As a typical example of reformist 'ʿulamāʾ, he is an influential figure on the attendees of LGM. On the contrary to him, as a representative figure of traditionalist Deobandī 'ʿulamāʾ, Mawlānā Abdullah advocates that people should follow one of the four famous mujtahids, namely Abū Ḥanīfa (d.150/767), İmām Mālik (d. 179/795), İmām Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), and Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d.241/855) as a religious authority since they reached the peak of knowledge, piety, and sincerity ('ilm, taqwā and ikhlāṣ, respectively).

This study also suggests that the Internet is an alternative choice for ordinary Muslims in seeking religious authority. With its easy access and offering to the surfers a kind of confidentiality as well as comfort when asking questions about their private and personal matters as religious life is concerned, the Internet provides a secure platform for ordinary Muslims to reach more famous scholars as religious authority.

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