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## **Thinking Congregationally about British Muslims**

### ***Introduction***

Scholarship on contemporary Islam has long since recognised that wherever Muslims settle in diaspora, they soon establish mosques, and this is true in Britain also. A brief selection includes studies of historic and early mosques (Gilliat-Ray 2010, Geaves 2011, Ansari 2011; Barton 1986), as well as mosque conflicts and controversies, particularly around local authority planning applications (Gale 2011, DeHanas and Pieri 2011). Mosques have also been explored in relation to gender, counter-extremism, and political participation (Brown 2008, Jones et al 2014). A comprehensive study of the architectural features of British mosques (Saleem 2018) has enabled recognition of their historical and cultural importance. Although the study of British mosques is developing, many aspects of their functioning are poorly understood and conceptualised (see AUTHOR 2016 and 2019). One component of the mosque which has yet to be explored is the congregation, which I believe has been overlooked in British Muslim Studies and Islamic Studies. Estimates of the number of British mosques vary. Some place the figure as anywhere between 850 and 1,500 (Gilliat-Ray and Birt 2010), whereas Mehmood Naqshbandi (2017) records 1,975 in his database of mosques in Britain – compared to 1,743 according to the same database in 2015. This growth, 232, over a period of two years is a sizable increase. It indicates a period of congregational growth, especially when it is remembered that this statistic does not account for mosque expansion projects. Jonathan Birt speaks about the ‘mosque-building-phase’ during which the bulk of British mosques were established (2005, 687). We are currently however in what I believe is the era of the congregation for British Muslims, in which a new and emerging form of religious association is taking prominence. In the following paper I argue that the congregation should be understood as more than just those who

attend the mosque, but rather that the congregation is the primary means by which Muslims in Britain communally perform, engage, and share religion. It is replacing older dominant forms of organisation such as the *tariqa*. In this paper, I outline the case for thinking congregationally about Islam, and what it offers to Islamic Studies, Religious Studies, and the Sociology of Religion. In order to do this however, I begin with existing works of congregational studies, which have predominantly emerged out of research concerned with Christian churches, and consider what it can offer for a scholar interested in Muslim congregations.

### ***The Landscape of Congregational Studies***

Congregational studies is a small component existing at an interdisciplinary intersection of theology, religious studies, sociology of religion, and anthropology. It is a relatively young field (depending on one's view), with studies largely emerging in the last six decades. To provide an overview of publications within congregational studies, it is possible to turn to three synthesising works produced across three decades. The first is James Hopewell's posthumous 'Congregation: Stories and Structures' (1987), which presented an important reflection on an emerging field. About a decade after Hopewell, Nancy Ammerman, Carrol Jackson, Carl Dudley, and William McKinney published 'Studying Congregations' (1998), in which they offered their own analysis of the field and guidance to scholars interested in undertaking research on churches. In the decade following the publication of Ammerman et al's work, British sociologists of religion made their intervention with 'Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian context' (Guest et al 2004). Each book provides a review of existing literature thus far, with frames and categories of analysis.

Hopewell's analysis remains influential in the subsequent two works to be presented.

Congregational studies had been for some years now a burgeoning field, with scholars

on both sides of the Atlantic devoting themselves to it. Hopewell argues that congregations have been predominantly studied in four ways; contextual, mechanic, organic, or symbolic (Hopewell 1987, 19-20). The contextual approach was utilised by scholars who looked at the 'textures' of the congregation, its local story as part of a wider whole, and which emphasised the global over the local. The research produced by the World Council of Churches is cited as a key example of this approach (Wieser 1966; Goodall 1968) by Hopewell. The mechanistic approach prioritised the physical, examining issues such as size, dimensions, architecture, and other quantifiable elements. A strong theme of the mechanistic approach is church-growth, and importance of attendance to congregational vitality, for example Wagner's 'Your Church Can Grow: Seven Vital Signs of a Healthy Church' (1976) or 'Churches and How They Grow' by Belew (1971). The third frame used by Hopewell views the congregations as a living whole, existing in an ecological landscape of which it was a part and dependant, what he terms the organic approach. These studies might consider the influence of society on the church, for example, the way in which congregations turn to a church due to dissatisfaction or alienation from the rest of society (Worley 1976). Conversely, they may consider the influence of the church on society itself, such as how a church can foster a sense of community (Whitehead and Whitehead 1982). Finally there is the fourth approach, certainly more Hopewell's own preference, that looked at the signification and the symbolism of congregations through ethnographic 'thick description' made popular in the social sciences via Geertz (1973) – this is the symbolic approach found in studies such as Nelson (1971) or 'Community in a Black Pentecostal Church: An Anthropological Study' (Williams 1984). These considered the church as a unique sub-culture or field of cultural action, with its own idiosyncratic ways of being. At the time Hopewell wrote, the predominant literature produced within

congregational studies was by Christians and for Christians, and only the ethnographies (such as Williams 1984) were written for a broader academic audience.

Ammerman et al provide a review a decade after Hopewell. In their analysis, there are also four predominant frames. The 'ecological frame', the 'culture frame', the 'resources frame', and the 'process frame' (1998, 14). As for the ecological, it is comparable to Hopewell's 'organic' in that the approach calls 'to see the congregation as an organism in an environment in which there are many other organisms that together make up the social and religious world' (Ammerman 1998, 14). Ammerman's own work fits this frame well, such as 'Congregation and Community' (1997), but also 'Beyond the Good Samaritan: Community Ministry and Mission' (2003). The priority of the ecological frame is a view of the 'community', the broader world of which 'religion' is simply one subset.

The 'culture frame' echoes most strongly the 'symbolic' of Hopewell, it is to study the congregation as a unique case-study of ways of interaction, being, and embodiment – the term 'culture' here certainly echoes Geertz's definition of culture (1973). Becker and Eisland's (1997) 'Contemporary American Religion: An Ethnographic Reader' is an illustrative example of the culture frame.

The 'resource frame' is predominantly about 'capital', what capital (financial, social, spiritual) do congregations create and what do they do with them. American studies within this framework are heavily focused on finances (Hoge 1996; Mead 1999; Wuthnow 1997). The conceptual term of 'spiritual capital' (Verter 2003) however has been pursued by British scholars. Davies and Guest (2007) explore the way in which religious authority can be shared by clergy and their family (wives and children) within congregations in England, and a Christian London-based think-tank Theos used the term to explore the contribution of cathedrals to British civic life (Theos 2012).

Finally, there is the 'process frame' which 'calls attention to the underlying flow and dynamics of a congregation that knit together its common life and shape its morale and climate' (Ammerman 1998 et al, 14). Many of these studies take conflict, authority, and power as their subject, such as Halverstadt's 'Managing Church Conflict' (1991) or Edgell's 'Congregations in Conflict' (1999).

Ammerman et al's framework (1998) has had an undeniable influence not only in describing the field, but as a textbook that has become *the* textbook for many members of Christian congregations and clergy undertaking studies of their church, and has thus impacted how these individuals have undertaken their own studies.

Across the Atlantic in Britain, Guest, Tusting, and Woodhead (2004) presented their own review of congregational studies literature, this time with a largely two-fold division of 'extrinsic studies' and 'intrinsic studies' (Guest et al 2004, 1-2). These categories are further divided. So extrinsic studies can be classified as *communitarian*, *church-growth*, *organizational*, *church-health*, or *theological*. Whereas intrinsic studies can be *self-contained*, *typologizing*, *contextualising*, or *multi-focused*. The extrinsic studies looked at the individual congregation for some broader, external, purpose, for example, to consider the loss of community in Britain or to assess church health in denominations. Intrinsic studies however are more focused on issues within the congregation, the 'symbolic' of Hopewell and the 'cultural frame' of Ammerman would be typical of intrinsic studies. They focused much more on the congregation, their lives, and sought to analyse the church on its own terms.

The most distinctive categorisation presented by Guest et al when compared to Ammerman et al and Hopewell's frames is that of extrinsic *theological*. The authors observe that '[a]n important development which paralleled the production of extrinsic

congregational studies was the growth of 'practical' or 'pastoral' theology in the UK after the 1960s', which: -

'encouraged congregational studies by insisting that theology must be done not 'from above' (doctrine imposed on experience) but from below (doctrine explored from the starting point of lived experience), and that the congregation is the core site of Christian experience'(Guest et al 2004, 8).

As examples of this 'theology from below', they cite the work of Browning (1991), Graham (1996), and Fulkerson (2001). The publications and work of The Centre for Theology & Community ([www.theology-centre.org.uk](http://www.theology-centre.org.uk)) also follows a similar theme. This category is obscured by Hopewell and Ammerman et al's reviews, but is a substantial part of the British congregational studies landscape.

Taking the field as a whole, including the aforementioned reviews of congregational studies literature by Hopewell, Ammerman et al, and Guest et al, one can observe its manifest diversities. The first is the methodological diversity - it draws together both textual approaches and ethnographic. It has also attracted a variety of scholars. Thus one finds work by religious studies scholars as well as social scientists, theologians and anthropologists, Christians and non-Christians. Alongside disciplinary diversity, it's worth noting how the field has had contributions from scholars at varying stages of their career. A cursory search on the site EThOs, a British Library project cataloguing doctoral theses authored in UK universities, provides a long list of church ethnographies, several produced in the last few years alone (Fenton 2017; Gaddini 2018; Zschomler 2018; Packiam 2018; Johnson 2019; Amoateng 2019; Burrell 2019). While Christian congregations may be declining numerically, the study of congregations remains in robust health, even when the project itself may not be strictly conceptualised as 'congregational studies'. In a similar vein, textbooks such as Cameron

et al's 'Studying Local Churches' (2005), and the already cited Ammerman et al's 'Studying Congregations: A New Handbook' (1998) provide guidance on how even non-specialists can undertake research on their own congregations. Congregational studies is distinctive then as an academic project with contributions from established professors, doctoral students, as well as non-specialists. Another important diversity present in congregational studies the involvement of 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. The insider/outsider issue has remained a staple of religious studies methodological debates (McCutcheon 2005; Chryssides 2019), but congregational studies is a space where scholars can collectively contribute to the same wider academic project – sometimes even within a single book. Cameron et al., for example, boast that the work brings together an 'anthropologist, a sociologist, an analyst of organisations and a theologian' (2005 xv). This diversity, for a field as relatively small as congregational studies, is remarkable and admirable. The natural progression, I argue within this paper, is to broaden the horizons of congregational studies and include more confidently the congregations of other religions. I believe it is of benefit to academia, especially scholars of Islam, to begin *thinking congregationally* about their research.

### ***Thinking Congregationally***

Having surveyed the field of congregational studies, I now turn to argue more fully how a project of congregational studies about mosques and Muslims might be undertaken. This requires *thinking congregationally*, that is to analyse mosques, institutions, and Islam through the lens of the congregational associations which accompany them. In order to achieve this, I clarify what a congregation is, utilising existing definitions but synthesising my own and subsequently outlining how such a definition can be applied in scholarship.



### *What is a congregation?*

Congregational studies has naturally had a number of conceptualisations and definitions of the congregation put forward. In this section, I present three of them, selected for being clear and concise articulations that can be engaged with and critiqued, before outlining my own definition, developed primarily with Muslim congregations in mind.

Hopewell proposes the following: -

‘My working definition of the congregation is this: *A congregation is a group that possesses a special name and recognised members who assemble regularly to celebrate a more universally practised worship but who communicate with each other sufficiently to develop intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook, and story.*’ (Hopewell 1987, 13, emphasis in original)

Another definition is available from scholars Cameron et al who describe the congregation as a ‘group of people with varying interests and backgrounds who meet because they have something in common; who share fellowship, a sense of vision for the world’ (Cameron et al 2005, xiii).

A third definition put is:

‘Congregations, in their prototypical American form, are locally situated, multi-generational, voluntary organizations of people who identify themselves as a distinct religious group and engage in a broad range of religious activities together. They are usually, but not always, associated with some larger tradition and its affiliated regional and national bodies (i.e., a denomination)...The space where they meet may or may not be an identifiably religious building, but congregations do typically have a regular meeting place and regular schedules of religious activity.’ (Clarke and Ammerman 2009, 563)

Notably all three definitions omit any emphasis on belief or theology. This is expected, given that these scholars will have sufficiently interrogated inherited Western notions of

religion as primarily about belief, but it also raises an important aspect of the congregation, congregating is an *activity*. In studying congregations, the scholar is putting their attention on an active dimension of religion.

The second notable feature of the definitions is their implicit foregrounding of relationships. Congregations are people who relate to each other either through ‘intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook, and story’ (Hopewell 1987 13), or via their ‘fellowship’ or ‘vision for the world’ (Cameron et al 2005, xiii), or through their identity as a ‘distinct religious group’ (Clarke and Ammerman 2009, 563). This relationship is not only horizontal (with each other) but also vertical (present in Hopewell and Clarke and Ammerman’s allusions to the universal or larger traditions).

There is a further conclusion I draw from these definitions. The aforementioned conceptions of the congregation are about activity (praxis), and relationships as I have mentioned. If a congregation is then a group of people *doing religion together* than it follows they share some conception of orthopraxis. Orthopraxis, in general, has not received a significant amount of scholarly attention as a concept to explore, largely since it implies a normative expression of religion. However, it seems a fundamental part of the congregation. Quinn and Davidson, writing the seventies, argued that such a conception might further develop the relationship between sociology and theology, ‘orthodoxy-orthopraxis can be understood, not only as believing, but as doing religious faith in a social context’ (1976, 350). They wrote as theologians, considering how the church might benefit from emerging sociological studies of Christians, so their call for a focus on orthopraxis was unlikely to reach or have impact on sociologists. The argument however highlights that when scholars research people ‘doing religious faith in a social context’ they are also researching conceptions of orthopraxis, whether or not they choose to acknowledge it.

There are critiques that can be made of the definitions proposed too. Hopewell's definition is potentially circular. He contends within 'Congregation: Stories and Structures' (1987) on the importance of a Geertzian understanding of religion as a unique and particular expression of a symbols, meanings, and significance. Defining the congregation as having '*intrinsic patterns of conduct, outlook, and story*' (Hopewell 1987, 13) however precludes the potential universality of that symbol, meaning, and significance. His identification of the congregation having a 'special name' is also debateable, many congregations (including Christian ones) may not see themselves as congregants at all, but Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists part of their worldwide fraternity of co-religionists. Cameron et al's definition is also potentially too broad. It could include a local football league, an environmental campaign group, or the local chapter of a political party, which inevitably leads one back to the well-trodden debate of 'what is religion?'. Clarke and Ammerman's definition benefits from being situated geographically as typical of the United States and implicitly, Christian groups. It raises questions however. Can an online group of religious worshippers be considered a congregation if they are spread across the world and not 'locally'? Can groups of people who come together 'irregularly', such as the rituals held domestically by Muslim women (Mazumdar and Mazumdar 2004), but who nonetheless maintain all other aspects of the definition, qualify? All definitions look towards the people participating, and downplay the importance of the buildings in which activities take place. But do buildings, such as institutional prayer rooms, which attract regular worshippers but of different religions, who (in a place such as an airport) may only ever pray together once in their entire lives, have a congregation? Or are they 'congregation-less'? These critiques however are not fundamental failures of the definition, rather, they open a juncture of analysis, and prompt one to begin considering the role, nature, and function

of the congregation. I'd like to go some way towards opening these questions for interrogation by applying them to Muslim groups.

### *Doing Religion Together*

So what does it mean to be 'thinking congregationally'. Having reviewed some of the literature emerging out of American and British congregational studies, as well as definitions of the congregation, I argue that congregations are *people doing religion together*. This needs some further clarification however, in order to differentiate the congregation from other dimensions of religious communal practice.

Drawing on the definitions of the congregation reviewed earlier it's possible to identify some key aspects of what congregational behaviour looks like. In studying how people do religion together, we should pay attention to *activity* or *praxis*. Conceptualising religion as a verb, in much the way Karen Armstrong writes in *The Case for God*, that 'religion is hard work' (2009, 8), helps foreground the everyday, the emic, and the unexpected. It also doesn't divide unnecessarily the textual against lived religion.

Religion as a verb is a conversation between text (in the widest sense of the word) and practice. Shahab Ahmed, a late scholar, wrote in *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (2015) that Islam is a discursive relationship between the individual and pre-text, text, and con-text. He argues that Islam is not a religion on this basis. I find his discursive approach convincing and useful, but rather than concede Islam is not a religion based on a restrictive view of religion, I would rather open up the conceptualisation of religion and consider all religious practice discursively.

Thinking congregationally also entails looking at relationships. How do people relate to one another, and on what terms? When they disagree, how do they disagree? How does the congregation relate to those outside of it, whether other congregations, the nation state, or larger denominational hierarchies? Thinking congregationally requires a

constant shift between the individual and different types of communality (congregational identity, religious identity, national identity, local identity etc...). Finally, to think congregationally is to think about 'orthopraxis'. There is no dearth foregrounding the importance of orthodoxy in studies of religion, however despite a turn away from a belief-centred conceptualisation of religion towards one which is open to multiple alternatives (Spickard 2017), there has been little interest in considering the question of orthopraxis. In undertaking twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork at a British mosque (AUTHOR 2016), the negotiation of orthopraxis was the single most important contestation that took place. The congregants sought to behave Islamically, and censure others as 'unIslamic' when their behaviour fell outside of accepted norms. Orthopraxis created *baraka*, or blessings, that sacralised the space of the mosque. Heteropraxis broke that *baraka*, removed it. Orthopraxis remains, I believe, a valuable conceptual tool for the scholar of religion. Thinking congregationally then is to consider the ways in which *people do religion together*, with attention to the *doing* and considering religion as diverse activities (beyond rituals and prayer). Here we can emphasise the importance of locating the *doing* temporally and spatially, where do people do religion and when do they do it? Thinking congregationally also entails looking at the relationships involved in this activity, horizontally and vertically, the immediate relationships and the global ones. Finally, thinking congregationally is an exploration of *orthopraxis*, which opens an avenue of analysis that considers the role of text, dogma, and normative teachings.

### ***Muslim Congregational Studies***

Having considered the tools that congregational studies offer the scholar of British Muslims, I turn now to the Muslim congregation itself. In the following sections, I explore conceptually the Muslim congregation, putting forward some tentative claims

on role and function of the congregation amongst British Muslims. I then turn to a more empirical consideration of what we already know of the Muslim congregation, a consideration that is largely quantitative but will provide a basis for future scholarship.

### *The Emergence of the Muslim Congregation*

If I am to argue that there is merit and value in considering the congregation in relation to British Muslim studies, I must make the case that the term 'congregation' is valid to describe Muslims, and not simply a case of carelessly applying a Christian term to other religions. Is the idea of the congregation meaningful in contemporary Islam, and does it have historical and theological presence?

The congregation, I believe, is a particular form of religious organisation that has been present from the very inception of Islam, but has varied in importance and prominence throughout history. Ammerman sees the congregation as something that emerges whenever and wherever 'religious communities are in diaspora', and that 'something like a congregation can stand alongside families to sustain a religious tradition that gets little support from the rest of culture' (2009, 564).

The Prophet Muhammad and his followers in Makkah were organised much like a congregation, meeting regularly and often secretly, to preserve and pass-on the new religion. The first mosque, arguably, is located in Eritrea, where Muslim converts from Makkah fled to escape persecution, establishing a regular place of worship in the coastal town of Massawa. The Prophet Muhammad and his followers did not directly establish a mosque until leaving Makkah for Madinah. This provides a period of thirteen years in which the early Muslims in Makkah organised as a congregation without a physical space, making access of private homes to meet.

Following the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Islam became a dominant religion in the Arabian Peninsula. Mosques continued to be established, evolving various functions

and inflections as they developed into institutions such as the *zawiya*, the *khanaqah*, the *jamia masjid*, the *madrassa* and the university. One particular form of mosque is what were often what are called ‘tribal mosques’ (Rasdi 2014, 85). The tribe was the dominant means of social organisation in Arabian society during early Islamic history. As such, unsurprisingly, many mosques were established along tribal lines, even to the extent that ‘the people of your masjid’ became a term meaning ‘your tribe’ (Pedersen et al 2014, 649). The ‘tribal mosque’ was intended for daily prayers, social organisation, and occasional worship. Pedersen et al. argue that Muslims in the early period were expected to attend the ‘chief mosque’ of an area for the Friday prayers (2014, 649), a practise that continues in many places in the Muslim world with *jamia masjid*, a specific larger mosque allocated the responsibility for the Friday prayers (see AUTHOR 2019 for an in-depth description of the functions of British mosques). Congregational affiliation amongst Muslims then has always had the potential for being multiple, ranging from a local or tribal mosque, to the larger *jami masjid*.

The mosque has remained a key part of Muslim expression throughout history into the modern period, but its role in religious organisation and communal activity varied. It could be central, such as in the case of the time of the Prophet Muhammad, or more peripheral. The advent of the *tariqa* certainly created a new paradigm for the communal expression of religious worship. Yilmaz (2018) argues that Sufi tariqas emerged in Anatolia during a period of political upheaval following both the Crusades and the Mongol invasions in the twelfth century, as well as the religiously competitive environment of Anatolia itself in which religious epistemological framework held monopoly. The *tariqa* grew in importance in this context, and became a significant form of religious communal activity - ostensibly associated with Sufism and a means of organisation that be super-local or even transnational (Knysh 2017; Sedgwick 2017).

Ahmed (2015) makes the argument for a conceptual framework to describe the geographic and temporal arena of the Balkans to Bengal Complex, which was in operation from 1350-1850 across much of Eurasia. The emergence of this paradigm, in which Sufism was central according to Ahmed, is in my view inextricably linked to the rise and demise of the *tariqa* as a form of communal religious organising.

In places like Britain, America, Australia, and parts of Europe, where Muslims have found themselves detached from the historical institutions of the Muslim world and within a minority diasporic context, Sufi groups have struggled to maintain the legitimacy of the *tariqa*, which though remaining important has required reinvention (Bruinessen and Howell 2013). It has led to what has been described as ‘post-tariqa Sufism’ (Sedgwick 2016), a phenomenon that is being explored by current doctoral student at Cardiff University Ayesha Khan, who considers the ways in which young Muslims are exploring Sufi practice, beliefs, and teachings outside of the *tariqa*. Post-tariqa Sufis in the West, in many ways, can be argued to behave much more like congregations than the *tariqa* of the past. Other forms of communal religious institutions include the *madrassa* – educational institutions of varying degrees of formality. Ingram has explored Deobandi networks of madrassas and their activity as a form of ‘revival’ (Ingram 2018), an account that highlights how central the institution is to teaching, continuing, supporting, and maintaining religion. A very basic form of religious association is the *halaqa* (Hairgrove and Mcleod 2008; Bhimji 2009), referring to a ‘circle’ of students sat around a teacher. In Muslim contexts, the *halaqa* can be a regular part of religious instruction, an occasional gathering, or part of the activities of charismatic leaders. Certain denominations and movements employ their own idiosyncratic means of *doing religion together*, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, who have a formalised system called the *usra* or ‘family’ (Anani 2016; 87), a group of five



to six individuals meeting regularly for *tarbiyyah* (spiritual and moral development).

The *usra* operates as part of a wider network of *usra*, creating a hierarchy of membership and authority.

This summary I hope demonstrates how Muslims in Britain have at their disposal a broad array of means of communal organisation, used by Muslims throughout history.

The emergence of the congregation, operating within and through British mosques, is by no means a certain conclusion of Muslim migration to a new location or even following the establishment of mosques.

While maintaining the legitimacy of the term ‘congregation’ in the study of Islam, it is worth considering what Vinding (2018) describes as the ‘churchification’ thesis. This is a range of process that include ‘pedagogical, analogical or rhetorical’ mobilisation of comparison between Muslims and Christians, mosques and churches, imams and priests; the implicit presumption that Islam in Europe should operate in the same way as Christianity in Europe; the unavoidable influence of churches and Christianity on Muslims in Europe; and finally, the deliberate co-option or rejection of Christian models by Muslims (Vinding 2018). It could be argued I have fallen into the first error, by using a Christian term (congregational) to describe Muslims. I have outlined within this paper several reasons why congregations are an element of Muslim practice (though the extent to which contemporary congregational practice is influenced by Christian congregational practice remains to be explored). The third and fourth category of ‘churchification’ however might be in operation. Congregational behaviour by Muslims might be unintentionally or intentionally adopted because of its familiarity in the Western European context. The congregation is recognised by the public and the state as a mode of religious organisation, which confers several advantages to Muslims seeking to undertake activities. Likewise, congregations help provide a framework to

co-operate and communicate meaningfully with other faith groups, foremost amongst them of course, other Christians. Ammerman refers to this also, writing that religious minority groups are ‘shaped both by the dictates of religious traditions and by each society's cultural and legal expectations as to how religious organizations are supposed to work - what sociologists might call an ‘institutional template’’ (2009, 566).

In summary, the congregation, I argue, is a form of religious communal behaviour that can be found amongst Muslims historically, but that it has taken on a new prominence and relevance amongst Muslims in diaspora. Part of this can be explained by ‘churchification’ (Vinding 2018) and Europe’s ‘institution template’ (Ammerman 2009, 566), but there remain other factors unconsidered and hitherto unexplored.

#### *Describing the Muslim Congregation*

The term ‘congregation’ has also been employed by numerous other scholars of Islam, usually sociologists, in describing the activities of mosques and those who attend them. This includes European studies (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Bartels and Jong 2007; Borell and Gerdner 2011; Kors 2018) as well similar works in the United States (Lofti 2001; Wang 2017). None of the aforementioned scholars have however provided a description, rationalisation, or reflection on their choice of the term, it has generally been deployed in a superficial descriptive sense. That however doesn’t necessarily entail criticism, from a purely etymological basis, the term *congregate* has parallels with the Arabic word *jamaa*, which would be synonymous with congregation and used in the same way. There are plenty of reasons to deploy the term without scholars feeling the need to problematise or provide a more developed conceptual framework. That said, if the attention and focus of a study is the social and communal dimension of religious practice or the operation of mosques there is a need to more fully describe what a

Muslim congregation looks like. Nancy Ammerman offers a description of the Muslim congregation below: -

‘The Friday prayer service in Muslim territories falls somewhere between the pattern of occasional ritual gathering and settled religious community.

Mosques do not routinely have membership rolls and rosters of social programming; the faithful are simply expected to stop (at the nearest mosque or at home or work) when they hear each day's calls to prayer.

Communal prayers, however, are highly valued, and the Friday prayers and sermon express both devotion to Allah and the ideals and concerns of the gathered community. Being a good Muslim requires these local gathering places for prayer and study, even if in Muslim cultures the faith is sustained by an entire social fabric of institutions beyond the local mosque. Outside Muslim territories, mosques often take on fully ‘congregational’ forms, with imams who function much like other professional clergy’ (2009, 565).

Ammerman notes the difference in operation of the mosque within and outside of ‘Muslim territories’, emphasising that in Muslim-majority countries, Islam is practised, expressed, and sustained through ‘an entire social fabric of institutions beyond the local mosque’, here we can point to the *tariqa*, the *halaqa*, the *usra*, and other forms of communal organisation introduced earlier, as well as schooling and the family.

However, Ammerman introduces another phrase needing unpacking – what does it mean to be ‘fully congregational’? Especially pertinent is the question, what does it mean to be ‘fully congregational’ in a Muslim context, lest we contribute to ‘churchification’ and impose a Christian form of the congregation onto Muslims. Trying to answer this question definitively would be premature. I would

like however to provide a description below, one that is far from conclusive and comprehensive, but nonetheless provides some orientation.

The Muslim congregation is a voluntary association of Muslims meeting regularly for the purpose of practising Islam together. The association is loose and tiered, with some strongly associated with the group and others only participating occasionally. The Muslim congregation's loci of authority is within the congregation itself, so even when the congregation does affiliate with a wider movement, denomination, or leader, this affiliation is voluntary and the congregation can choose to disaffiliate itself. The congregation meets physically, and the location may be fixed or shifting. Muslims can participate in more than one congregation, and likewise, a single congregation can be spread over multiple sites. The core practice of the congregation is the ritual prayer (*salah*), but a wider variety of other activities can and are undertaken by the congregation.

This definition emerges out of both of my recent research on British mosques, as well as review of literature. It is, like Hopewell's 1987 definition, a working definition that requires further exploration. A significant dimension of the British mosque has already been gestured towards in stating the loci of authority remains within the congregation itself. British mosques, without exception, are congregationalist. I again adopt a Christian term here, congregationalist referring to independent, autonomous, and sovereign churches run by the congregation who worship there. (see Jones 1962). In Wales they are sometimes referred to as 'independents'. Mosques in the United Kingdom are founded, funded, and maintained through the congregations who worship there. This is much like congregationalist and independent churches, who differ from Anglican and Catholic churches and their hierarchies of power. In Muslim majority countries,

some mosques are part of the state structure or embedded within a wider, sometimes transnational, hierarchy. In the United Kingdom, it is the congregation who are largely responsible for the upkeep of the mosque, the salaries of imams, and general finances. While committee members and imams may be influential, they negotiate this power with the congregation. There are sometimes external funders of mosques, but it is rare for a mosque to be solely funded by a single organisation or source, and in many cases external donations are used for capital costs rather than running costs (which thereby limits their influence on the day-to-day running of the mosque).

It is notable that in much of the literature on mosques, the congregation are absent from considerations of power and authority, instead overshadowed by reference to the mosque committee and imams. Lewis speaks of the way in which some imams seek 'freedom from control by conservative mosque committee elders' (2006, 175) while Jones et al. state that in the UK, 'the majority of mosques are run by local lay committees, with the imam sometimes being a minor functionary' (2014, 216). Geaves also focuses on these two agents when he reflects on the conditions which lead to mosques recruiting imams from abroad and concludes that it 'may reflect the desire of young imams to seek employment in Britain but also their amenability to the control of the powerful mosque committees' (2008, 103), and Shannahan discusses how 'UK Mosque management committees privilege male involvement' (2013, 1). While all examples cited are no doubt accurate, the absence of other mosque actors in the literature is notable, especially the congregation. If the committee is as powerful as the literature suggests, how does it achieve and manage this power? Are there any ways in which their power is resisted or challenged? Werbner (1990, 310-311) sheds some light on how a mosque committee might cement their influence over the congregation

through her example of competitive charity, but the tendency to simplify the British mosque to imams and a committee is still prominent. The congregation is not a minor partner in the mosque, it is in many cases a precursor to the mosque itself. As such, the congregations need to be re-centred into our conceptualisation and understanding of mosques. Mosques are the most numerous Muslim institutions in the UK, but it is the congregation that is the mechanism by which Muslims engage with these institutions. It is the congregation who provide the financial, human, and spiritual capital to make Britain's estimated 2000 mosques feasible.

### ***The Size of the Muslim Congregation***

In the following section, I will attempt to trace an outline of what we know about the British Muslim congregation, paying attention predominantly to quantitative issues. This has the benefit of providing a baseline for further studies, allowing a numerical comparison with British Christian congregations, and also for making the case that congregations are worthy of attention, if only because they describe a substantial element of Muslim religious practice today.

Statistical figures or estimates on Muslim congregation sizes are sparse. A 2015 survey indicated that 60% of British Muslims visit a mosque once a week (ICMUnlimited 2016). However, as the survey focused on Muslims living in areas where at least 20% of the population are Muslim, these are likely inflated figures (since such places have a higher concentration of mosques, making them more accessible). If we accept these figures as indicative (with a dose of scepticism) then 60% of Britain's 2.6 million Muslims attending a mosque at least once a week would translate as an overall weekly congregation of 1.6 million Muslims, dwarfing Anglican figures of 756,000 weekly congregants (Wright 2018). To add to this, a survey from 2005 indicated 930,000 Muslims attended a mosque at least once a week (Christian Today), though, once again,

the data needs to be approached with caution. The research was conducted by a Christian faith-based polling company and released as a 'call to action' for Christian groups. I am also unable to access the survey's methodology thus can't assess the reliability of the data. The narrative behind the release of the data gives cause for scepticism too. A contrasting survey, conducted through YouGov, indicated 48% of British Muslims never attend a mosque (Wells 2006), which does not tell us much about congregation sizes, but raises the question of how many British Muslims are part of a congregation at all.

In Wales, a more meaningful estimate of a congregation can be given. There are, give or take, 57 mosques in Wales (or to be more precise, 57 places in Wales with a regular prayer space). Some of these aren't full-time mosques, but they have a congregation (especially important in rural areas or places with a smaller Muslim population). Others are schools, or small prayer facilities at a university, but again, the presence of a regular congregation makes them of interest. Based on a survey of imams, the physical capacity of Welsh mosques, and Friday prayers held in temporary sites, which I undertook between 2015 and 2017, there is a weekly mosque-going congregation in Wales of 19,300. That is out of a total Muslim population of 46,000 according to the 2011 census (most likely an under-count, and now out of date). These weekly congregants are based predominantly on attendance of the Friday *jumma* prayer, where congregations are most distinctly measurable (given many Muslims may worship at and attend several different mosques). Using this method however would overlook other forms of congregational participation, particularly those of women.

There are several difficulties in using a 'weekly attendance' figure in order to calculate the size of the congregation. First, mosques may over-estimate their congregation, both out of simple bias and wishful thinking, but also due to the need to justify expansion

projects that may be underway. To add to the complication, Muslims attending more than a single mosque means there is a potential for double-counting figures. Likewise, the influence of social desirability makes it difficult to ascertain mosque attendance from self-confessed attendance patterns as Muslims may again over-report how often they visit.

Congregations are also stratified. There is often a small contingent that attend a mosque daily (sometimes even more than once a day, many mosques have a small group of worshippers who attend all five of the daily prayers). There are then those who may attend weekly ('Friday Muslims' as they are sometimes disparagingly called) or annual ('Eid Muslims'). In the same vein, attendance is rhythmic. People may attend mosques more often during holidays than workdays, more often on a weekend than a weekday.

Local and mundane factors have an influence too. Some might attend more often in summer months, for the benefit of long evenings that allow them to walk to the mosque.

Others may attend more in winter, when they visit the mosque for *fajr* before the working day, and *isha* on the way home from work. Add to this there are trans-congregational movements, foremost among them the Tablighi Jamaat, whose attendance at a mosque become a difficult to quantify – they are not technically part of the congregation, but the movement's use of mosques nationally is so significant that discounting them entirely will fail to give a comprehensive picture of mosque usage and attendance. These factors, especially when taken cumulatively, make a simple numerical gauging of the congregation difficult. That does not mean it is impossible, but that new measures may need to be developed.

In considering the size of the congregation, it's necessary to also consider its breakdown by gender. We know it is predominantly male, reflecting that around 28% of British mosques do not have space for women (Naqshbandi 2017) There has been considerable



attention in both academic literature as well as journalism to campaigns for greater access and representation of women in mosques. This includes coverage of 'Britain's first female-managed mosque' (Gani 2015), the Muslim Council of Britain's programme to train women mosque leaders (Sherwood 2018), and campaigns such as 'Scottish Mosques For All' (Swindon 2018). There are also notable academic studies, such as Katz' 'Women in the Mosque' (2014) and Auda's 'Reclaiming the Mosque' (2017) that consider theology and religious teaching on the use and access of women to Islamic sacred spaces. The gendered use of mosque space is still being mapped. In my own research, I discovered a flexible and rhythmic use of mosques, and gendered boundaries breaking down and reasserting themselves throughout the day (AUTHOR 2016). It is important, in pursuit of understanding the British Muslim congregation, to understand the heterogenous ways in which individuals conceptualise their relationship to mosques. Muslim women are involved in many of the behind-the-scenes activities involved in running a mosque with much of it easily overlooked and made invisible since it often takes place 'backstage' in Goffmanian terms (Goffman 1959), a point made by Gilliat-Ray (2010, 202). In other words, if what counts as 'participation' in a mosque or congregation is restricted to attending the mosque for prayers, the intensive labour and contribution of women (usually first generation migrants) supporting the running of the mosque in ways such preparing food, providing childcare, and supporting in administrative and regulatory duties (accounts, paperwork, finances) can be erased. That said, amongst British-born Muslims, there is a strong movement calling for access and the right to pray in mosques on equal terms. In 2019, I worked the Muslim Council of Britain in undertaking a survey of Women's Perceptions of the Mosque 2019. The findings will be presented in a wider and full report published in 2020. The survey received 1,034 responses from women across Britain, and included questions on

mosque attendance. 55% of women responded they attendance a mosque 'regularly' (at least once a month), whereas 45% of the respondents indicated they never attended a mosque. Of those who did attend regularly, 57% regularly attendance a single mosque whereas 41% regularly attended between 2-4 mosques. These figures, which I'm cautious to generalise, gives us an indication of practice on the ground. The full picture of Muslim women who attend mosques is most likely much lower than the 57% of the survey respondents, who are predominantly British-born and young and self-selecting (having taken an interest in answering the questionnaire) and so hold different conceptions of orthopraxis than first generation Muslim migrants. It does however underscore two things. First, that younger Muslim women are taking a more active role in worshipping at a mosque, and in revealing that 40% of the respondents had an affiliation with more than one mosque, we are reminded of how fluid congregational belonging is.

Before concluding however, it's important to contextualise the quantitative element within the sociology of religion and critiques of it. Spickard writes that according to 'the default sociological view, one measures both religiosity and religious identification organizationally. Survey research, in particular, take such items as a frequency of church attendance, one's agreement or disagreement with established church doctrines, and the like as indications of one's religious commitment' (2017, 13). As Spickard himself and many others have recounted, this can easily miss religion that doesn't fit into tidy institutional boxes and which is less easily quantified. As an alternative sociological approach, many scholars adopted what has been termed as a study of 'lived religion', forgoing institutions, official theology, clergy, and church attendance in favour of exploring, from the ground up, the lives and experiences of those who deem themselves religious. This however runs the risk of overlooking the role of institutions

in everyday 'lived religion'. Ammerman, in a survey of the emerging field, argues that 'lived religion' has been defined by its exclusions, 'it includes attention to laity, not clergy or elites; to practices rather than beliefs; to practices outside religious institutions rather than inside' (2016, 1), making the case for including these exclusions while remaining focused on the everyday. So while numbers of attendance can be instructive, a project on Muslim congregational studies should be keen to learn from the lessons of Christian congregational studies, placing numerical attendance as a small and only indicative part of a wider, more complex picture. In some sense, numeracy gives us an indication of significance and importance and scope, which is my intention in presenting the data provided earlier. Religiosity, however, is rarely quantifiable in any meaningful way. What attendance figures however can help us observe is rhythms of the 'institutional' religious practice, the factors affecting congregational growth amongst Muslims, and most importantly, whether or not Muslims will become 'secularised' and adopt a privatised religious expression like their Christian and 'No Religion' fellow citizens, and thus abandon regular attendance at a religious institution. Attendance can help us build a picture of a specific type of religious expression, and little else.

### ***The Value of Congregational Studies***

There is, I believe, a case for the development of a clear field of British Muslim congregational studies. It is not a drastic shift in direction for the existing field of British Muslim studies, except that it centres the everyday experience of Muslims in relation to the institutions they have established. While subtle, this shift nonetheless offers significant rewards to scholars of Islamic Studies, British Muslim Studies, and the sociology of religion.

In terms of Islamic Studies, there is scope to bridge the gap between sociological studies and the philosophical, theological, and historical. This is perhaps best demonstrated by important work of Shahab Ahmed, who in 'What is Islam?' (2015) writes extensively on the field of Islamic law, philosophy, theology, and history. In his book, he criticises Clifford Geertz and his study 'Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia' (1971), writing 'one is hard pressed to find in it any evidence that Geertz has actually taken into serious consideration a single written text from the intellectual tradition of either of these two countries' (2015, 249). It is fair criticism, but one can also turn it back on Shahab Ahmed; in his 600-page work covering almost every aspect of Islamic studies with numerous claims about not just historical, but contemporary Muslims, there is no evidence Ahmed conducted even a single day of ethnographic fieldwork. The conflicting epistemological frameworks of textual Islamic studies, and sociological Islamic studies, are not unresolvable, but require greater inter-disciplinary collaboration. The congregation, I believe, offers fertile ground for such a project. It demonstrated the same capacity of bridging the worlds of text and practice, and between confessional and non-confessional approaches, in Christian congregational studies (Guest et al 2005), and is capable of doing the same for Islamic studies.

For British Muslim studies, it offers an important arena in which understanding is lacking. Throughout this paper, I have pointed to areas and presented questions to which we do not yet have the answer. In simple terms, I would argue that the growth of British Mosques is not yet understood, the congregational daily lives of British Muslims has not been well documented, and the mechanics by which the congregation develops and runs is only beginning to be traced. Until this blind-spot is addressed, British Muslim studies will have a patchy and partial understanding of the role of institutional religion in the daily lives of Muslims.

While in the Christian context, there are terms such as ‘chapel’, ‘church’, and ‘cathedral’ to indicate diversity of size, function, and denomination, there is not yet an established vocabulary for Anglophone Islam (AUTHOR 2019). In the academic literature about mosques, terms such as ‘multipurpose mosques’ or ‘community centre mosques’, and even ‘cathedral mosques’ are sometimes used (see Maussen 2009, 14, 214; Es 2012, 154; Zulfikar 2014, 176; McLoughlin 1998). The lack of consensus or consistency in terminology is indicative of a significant theoretical gap, and the need to develop a vocabulary and a deeper theoretical understanding of British Muslim religious practice to underpin it. To fully understand this, it is necessary to move from viewing the ‘mosque’ as a taken-for-granted concept, to looking at the various ways in which Muslims understand, engage, and establish mosques. In other words, the congregation needs to be taken into account.

Finally, for the sociology of religion, considering Islamic congregationally allows for developing new tools and methods. As Spickard relates, the ‘default’ view of sociology has been one that has considered institutions as the sole expression of religiosity, before developing alternative frameworks such as lived religion, which Ammerman ponders may have too strongly disregarded institutions. Thinking congregationally, I believe, offers a new frame. Here, the work of lived religion is drawn upon, but as thinking congregationally entails thinking about how people do religion together, it focuses on the communal aspects as much as the individual. It relates the experiences of the congregation back to the institutions they are part of and participate in. I also believe an exploration of orthopraxis as a term and concept will benefit the sociology of religion, religious studies, and our conceptualisations of religion in general.

The apparent success of a minority religion and its institutions, in the face of a presumed secularism, presents an important case study in documenting and tracking the

changing forms of religion in Britain, a shift that has been highlighted by numerous sociologists of religion (Woodhead and Catto 2012). The findings will provide a basis for further scholarship and debate about religion in modern Britain. The growth of Muslim congregations in Britain ties directly to questions of secularisation. Woodhead cites declining church attendance as an oft-used indicator of secularisation (2012, 5-6), it is an indicator she ultimately rejects, arguing instead religion is morphing into new, individualised and less institutionalised forms, and that 'secular' and 'religious' are losing their analytical power (Woodhead 2016). How do we, in a context of a society at times described as 'post-secular' (Habermas 2008) or 'post-Christian' (Guest et al 2004), understand British mosques? Davie has argued that the Anglican Church, despite falling attendance, plays an important role in the national and civic sphere in Britain (2015). The natural question, which I believe British Muslim congregational studies can address, is what role do and might the institutions of religious minorities play in Britain? The answer will help us understand much more about contemporary social, politics, modernity, and of course, religion.

### ***Conclusion***

While the field of congregational studies has been a largely Christian endeavour, it has nonetheless made significant achievements. First, it has been an integral component of the sociology of religion. It is telling that significant names in British and American congregational studies are also the influential names in the sociology of religion (namely, Nancy Ammerman in the United States, and Linda Woodhead and Mathew Guest in Britain). This is partly because 'congregational studies' shares a strong affinity with the methods and concerns with sociology of religion and is in many ways a subset of the project of the sociology of religion. Congregational studies allow for a study of religion that is particular (focusing on individual churches and everyday practice) while

also be generalisable (considering wider trends in religious practice within society).

Second, congregational studies has successfully included ‘insider’ voices and perspectives within a broad epistemological basis - by which I mean it has established a paradigm by which both Christians and non-Christians can engage in the study of Christianity on the same terms, and this has benefit when placed alongside developments in sociology more widely in which the traditional research subject or ‘other’ has increasingly become part of sociology broadly (Denzin and Lincoln 2000, 577), as well as an ongoing and ever-relevant debate in religious studies specifically (McCutcheon 2005; Chryssides and Gregg 2019). Third, it has a clear policy impact. Muslims, religion, and the emerging ‘faith sector’ (Harris et al 2003, Lowndes and Chapman 2007, Dinham et al 2009). The criteria for what counts as ‘impact’ is contested, and with some raising valid critiques that existing research frameworks for assessing ‘impact’ disadvantage research that provides a more ambiguous and long-term benefit (Jump 2015), but regardless of the efficacy of tracing impact, congregational studies has a range of benefits to Muslims. It isn’t uncommon to come across discussion of academia ‘giving back’ to their research participants. Congregational studies offers such an avenue, allowing for the production of data and knowledge that is not only of benefit to academia and academic understanding, but to Muslim mosques and groups themselves. Thus research on mosques can help Muslims better run their mosques, help local authorities develop policies and practices that recognise the role of mosques in their area, and help national government by ensuring it does not overlook Britain’s 2000 mosques, or else only treat them through the lens of security (Brown 2008).

I referenced earlier the work of Yilmaz (2018) and his contention that the political and social upheaval of twelfth century Anatolia led to the emergence of the *tariqa*, a form of association and organisation that would shape the trajectory and development of Islam

for centuries. As Muslims in diaspora establish themselves in Britain and elsewhere in diaspora, the congregation is in my view emerging and asserting itself as a key mechanism for religious organisation, especially in what can be described as Anglophone Islam. This too, I believe, will influence the trajectory and development of Islam globally for generations, and so stands as a worthy area for academic exploration.



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