

Editorial

# Introduction: Leadership, Authority and Representation in British Muslim Communities

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## 1. Introduction

Since its launch in 2005, the Islam-UK Centre at Cardiff University has initiated a range of projects concerned with issues of leadership, pastoral care, and the training of religious professionals working in British Muslim communities (Gilliat-Ray 2006; Gilliat-Ray 2010; Gilliat-Ray 2011; Ali and Gilliat-Ray 2012; Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013; Gilliat-Ray 2018). When we were approached with an invitation to act as guest editors of the international peer review journal *Religions*, this seemed a good opportunity to invite others to contribute to a focussed scholarly discussion of the debates around these topics.

However, rather than simply putting out a ‘call for papers’ that would reach primarily academics, we decided to host a one-day conference as a stimulus to the submission of contributions from as broad a range of audiences as possible. In keeping with the grassroots, community-orientated ethos of the Islam-UK Centre, we extended invitations to a broad spectrum of Muslim leadership ‘professionals’ and activists who could bring much-needed practitioner perspectives to the themes of the conference. The result was an event held on 21st January 2019, which explored some of the following questions: ‘Who speaks for British Muslims?’; ‘How is authority construed, constructed, and exercised in an age of mass media and the Internet?’; ‘What internal and external factors shape leadership structures and modalities of representation for British Muslims living as a minority in a culturally Christian but largely secular social context?’; ‘Where do leaders come from in a decentralised religious tradition lacking a priestly hierarchy?’; ‘How do government discourses and media representations impact upon dynamics of leadership and authority in British Muslim communities?’.

We were clear that the term ‘leadership’ should be interpreted widely given that it takes many forms. It includes liturgical and ritual leadership from imams (who may be paid, unpaid, or low-paid) and educational leadership from academics or those serving in madrassahs, seminaries, and other kinds of private establishments. It encompasses both women and men and is exercised in increasingly diverse ways, such as virtual forums online or Islamic television channels. Religious leadership is also provided by an elite group of professionals with expertise in Islamic law, who may carry the title ‘mufti’ or ‘ayatollah’, or by Sufi shaykhs who provide guidance for their disciples.

Political leadership has emerged via a number of British Muslims taking up positions within local and national governance, some of whom have acquired senior government positions, such as the current Mayor of London Rt. Hon. Sadiq Khan or Baroness Sayeeda Warsi (Peace 2015). Alongside this, a range of regional and national organisations have developed to ‘represent’ the interests of Muslim communities in civil society, often headed by those with skills derived from a variety of public service and charitable roles. Bodies such as the Muslim Council of Britain and their affiliates exercise national influence while various councils of mosques advocate on behalf of broad regional congregations. Muslim leadership roles have seen further diversification in recent decades through incorporation

into professions such as chaplaincy and youth work, while those British Muslims in senior positions within the media (such as Mehdi Hasan) or the third sector often function as influential spokespeople. Others who have succeeded in the public eye, such as Sir Mo Farah, CBE, Nadiya Hussain, MBE, or most recently, Liverpool footballer Mohamed Salah, act as ‘role models’ garnering followings among a wide cross-section of British society.

Arising from our conference, which brought together academics and practitioners with both theoretical and hands-on knowledge, this Special Issue explores the myriad ways in which British Muslims exercise leadership in a range of sectors. We are pleased that the articles gathered here explore issues of leadership from an interdisciplinary perspective, enabling scholars of religion, sociology, political science, history, and Islamic Studies to bring synergistic focus to a topic of current academic and political debate.

## 2. Academic Contributions

In considering the articles in this Special Issue, it may be useful to conceptualise British Muslim leadership as operating on the basis of two distinct yet complementary roles. These reflect the migratory history of a minority identity group defined on the basis of religion in a residually Christian but operationally secular legislative and cultural milieu (Cesari and McLoughlin 2005). On the one hand, leadership and authority are exercised *internally* within the community and enacted primarily for a confessional Muslim audience seeking educational, pastoral, moral, spiritual, or other types of instruction and guidance. On the other hand, leaders represent that self-same community—in all its diversity—to the wider society functioning as interlocutors with a wide range of *external* stakeholders, including media, government, or non-Muslim colleagues. The demands and expectations of each audience are different and consequently, as the contributions to this Special Issue illustrate, the skillsets, life experiences, accumulated social and cultural capital and, indeed, theological proficiency of different types of Muslim ‘leaders’ can vary greatly.

Let us reflect on each leadership orientation in turn. Religious authority within the community tends to be correlated with theology. Ultimate authority in Islam, from a purely religious perspective, derives from Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, and the constellation of Words—revealed and inspired—which entered history, so Muslims believe, through divine intervention in Arabia fourteen centuries ago. Fidelity to and intimacy with these primary sources, captured in the Qur’an and collections of Hadith, imbue both individuals and institutions with religious authority. When lay Muslims seek religious guidance, they often turn to those deemed to be well-versed in scripture who function as the embodiments and carriers of a tradition that reaches back through time to the founding moment of Islam. This proficiency in the Qur’an and the Hadith, along with a pious comportment and an ability to connect with the particular needs of a community or congregation in a given time and place, have perhaps been the key ingredients of Islamic authority through the ages (Zaman 2009; Bano 2019). A consistent theme of the papers presented in this Special Issue concerns the ongoing vitality of the ulema—both male and female—in shaping the religious subjectivities of British Muslims. Clearly, *tradition matters* to many British Muslims and, rather than being locked in a zero-sum game with modernity, various contributions that follow chronicle how it is nurtured, appropriated, negotiated, filtered, and engaged in accordance with the complex demands of their social context.

Other papers in this Special Issue focus on the outward engagement of the community with the wider society. Here the authority of the ulema is less pronounced as other Muslim actors with more social and cultural capital become positioned—sometimes inadvertently—as community spokespeople. Reciprocally, the state also seeks to influence the selection of interlocutors it is willing to engage (Abbas 2005; Archer 2009; Stjernholm 2010). In a wide-ranging study of state–Muslim relations across seven European countries, Jonathan Laurence (2012) proposes that the early decades of immigration—specifically 1960–1990—constituted a period of ‘Embassy Islam’, in which governments adopted a largely “hands-off” laissez-faire attitude to their newly established minorities by outsourcing their management to extant religious infrastructures in the countries of origin. The principal rationale behind this was what British

sociologist Muhammad Anwar (1979) has termed *The Myth of Return*; the idea that the Muslim presence in Europe was essentially functional and transient, motivated by economic gain, for which a set of temporary policy measures would suffice. The advent of a diaspora-born generation of Muslims, persistent issues around ‘integration’, the proliferation of rival networks of ‘Political Islam’ competing with ‘Embassy Islam’, and sporadic acts of terrorism committed on European soil collectively persuaded governments from 1990–2010, argues Laurence, to take a more “hands-on” policy approach to their Muslim minorities. In the UK, the Rushdie Affair functioned as a well-documented landmark event which catalysed a shift in community self-conceptualisation from a disparate assortment of ethnic groups to a common Muslim identity (Munnik 2019). Organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) emerged, which, unlike the ulema who speak for ‘Islam’ as such, instead took on the mantle of advocacy for various ‘Muslim community’ concerns.

The extent to which the MCB has subsequently been studied and written about in various academic and Muslim community publications is probably reflective of its stature as the most enduring and influential of Britain’s Muslim representative organisations (Radcliffe 2004; Birt 2005; McLoughlin 2005; Pędziwiatr 2007; Birt 2008a; Elshayyal 2018). This is despite the vicissitudes of its political fortunes as played out in its relations with successive UK governments and the growth of alternative organisations disillusioned with its representative claim-making (Archer 2009; Stjernholm 2010; Jones 2013). Nevertheless, there is no doubt its work has been integral to the development of a corporate Muslim identity in Britain. For this reason, we are delighted that this Special Issue contributes to an important ongoing conversation by including a unique ‘insider’s perspective’ on the formation and evolution of the MCB over its more than twenty years of operation.

Formal engagement with the government, however, is not the only—or even the most important—form of representation. In an oft-cited article, Jones et al. (2015) propose a typology of four leadership modes consisting of delegation, authority, expertise, and standing. While the MCB typifies the *delegation* mode of leadership, figures such as the late Dr Zaki Badawi or Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra provide examples of Islamic scholars who, based on their explicitly religious *authority*, have engaged consistently with mainstream community structures, including the media, to represent Islam. Other organisations, such as the controversial counterterrorism think tank Quilliam Foundation, have also staked a claim to authority based on the ostensible *expertise* conferred by the personal life experiences of the founders. Vince and Munnik’s contributions to this Special Issue, however, demonstrate the ongoing importance of *standing* as a model of leadership through which British Muslims already in the public eye sometimes speak on behalf of the religion.

It may be useful to distinguish here between ‘fundamental’ and ‘incidental’ conceptions of religious authority. Figures such as the aforementioned Dr Zaki Badawi or Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra achieved public prominence precisely because their credentials as Islamic scholars qualified them to speak about issues concerning the faith. By contrast, personalities such as the boxer Amir Khan or the baker Nadiyah Hussain were catapulted to fame through high-performance achievements in their respective competitive spheres. Nevertheless, their popularity may sometimes be leveraged to make statements about their faith in ways that resonate with a wider audience beyond their co-religionists. Amir Khan’s decision to enter the ring draped in a Union Jack flag following the 7/7 terrorist attacks, for example, showcased him as a ‘role model’ for integration (Jones et al. 2015, p. 218); while the BBC’s choice of Nadiya Hussain to front a two-part television series reporting on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca was only made possible by her prior success at The Great British Bake Off (BBC 2017).<sup>1</sup> For Munnik, such modes of leadership deriving from public ‘standing’ fit hand in glove with the decentralised nature of Sunni Islam and can act as powerful counterweights to rebalance negative representations of Muslims in the mainstream media. Away from the glare of the celebrity spotlight, Vince also highlights

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<sup>1</sup> Despite considerable publicity, the series however does not seem to have come to fruition.

the important yet often overlooked leadership exemplified by ordinary Muslims acting as ‘role models’ in the micro-contexts of everyday work and life.

The collection of articles presented in this Special Issue brings another point to the fore as revealed by a cursory glance at their titles. Two contain the word “loci”; three the word “mosque”; one references a specific city; three refer to “Islamic seminaries”; and two to “universities”. Clearly, *place matters* in the construction and enactment of British Muslim leadership. To put this differently, the social locations in which authority is incubated, exercised, and transmitted are of significance. Mosques and seminaries, for centuries, have functioned as sites of authority inhabited by imams (despite, as El-Yousfi shows, the mitigating impact of management committees) and ulema, custodians of a cherished theological tradition handed down over generations. Yet their influence has been significantly disrupted most recently through the pervasive impact of a global digital revolution. As Amin’s article in particular shows, ‘Sheikh Google’ offers a quick and easy alternative to the local imam and the technological savviness of contemporary ulema—in tandem with more historical constituents of authority—shapes a new-found ability to access potentially gargantuan virtual congregations. Gender plays a key role here too: Nyhagen’s article demonstrates how the physical space of the mosque can enable or constrain women’s participation in its religious life while several others—Birt, Cheruvallil-Contractor, Liberatore, Scott-Baumann and Vince—allude to the emergence, in different ways, of ‘third spaces’ in which female religious agency and leadership have found creative avenues of expression in contemporary Britain.

The training of Muslim scholars, and the different roles that seminaries and universities can play in their intellectual formation, is another key theme of this Special Issue addressed by several authors, namely Liberatore, Scott-Baumann et al., Shah, and Sidat. It also surfaced prominently in the various ‘Practitioner Perspectives’ that are discussed later in this Introduction. In particular, we are pleased that the Special Issue provided a fitting platform to present the first findings of a new research project—the Universities and Muslim Seminaries Project (UMSEP)—in which Professor Alison Scott-Bauman, along with a team of academics and Islamic scholars, highlights emergent models of Muslim community leadership through exploring issues of collaboration and accreditation in the Darul Uloom (seminary) and university sectors.

This proliferation of sites at which religious subjectivities are cultivated is an important symbol of the appropriation and inhabitation of space fundamental to diaspora communities seeking to establish permanent roots in a new homeland. What Laurence (2012, p. 30) terms the “residual paternalism” of Islamic organisations in Muslim-majority contexts toward their diaspora counterparts is perhaps best exemplified in this Special Issue by Timol’s chronicling of the local, regional, national, and international structures of authority of the global Islamic movement Tablighi Jama’at, which have facilitated a degree of successful intergenerational transmission in Britain. By contrast, Ahmed and Ali’s depiction of the Fultoli movement in Britain paints a picture of steady decline as its transplantation across continents largely fails to bear fruit among a British-born generation. The implications for religious authority are considerable. The individual charisma of Fultolir Sahib, bolstered by his spiritual lineage and a prophetic mandate to teach as relayed in a dream, sparked a distinct religious awakening among twentieth-century Sylheti Muslims. Yet these emblems of authority by themselves, the authors argue, were insufficient for his movement to take root and flourish in the UK. Echoes of Weber can be discerned here: should the charismatic authority of the founder fail to be embedded in institutional constructs, it is unlikely the movement will outlive him. The dynamics of immigration complicate this model but, nevertheless, juxtaposing the Fultoli tradition with the Tablighi Jama’at—two twentieth-century movements of Islamic revival originating in South Asia—yields useful analytical insights into how religious authority ‘travels’ (Mandaville 2001).

The establishment of Muslim leadership structures in Britain takes place amid older, more historic religious traditions. This raises a question about the extent to which the British Muslim experience should be viewed through the prism of other religious communities. Shah’s article detects “the ubiquitous inclination in the academic literature to draw Christian parallels” for Muslim religious life, as exemplified, for example, in the substitution of the word ‘seminary’ for Darul Uloom:

“This term too is borrowed from a Christian lexicon, emblematic of the perpetual urge to force Western Christian terms on to Islamic cognates that is so prevalent in this field.” On the other hand, Timol explicitly draws upon a model of ecclesiastical hierarchy—the “episcopal polity” of British Christianity—to illustrate the organisational structure of the Tablighi Jama’at. Bringing such divergent perspectives together within this Special Issue highlights the heterogeneous ways in which issues of leadership, authority, and representation in British Muslim communities may be approached. Clearly, as a member of the Abrahamic family of faiths, Muslims share much in common—historically and theologically—with the ‘People of the Book.’ Scholars such as Laurence (2012) and Jenkins (2007) further find grounds for optimism in examining the historical precedence of other religious minority groups—Jews, Catholics, Protestants—whose paths to enfranchisement and incorporation in various European contexts Muslims can usefully draw upon. Equally though, Spickard’s speculative recasting of the theoretical underpinnings of the sociology of religion makes the case for taking seriously indigenous epistemologies which, among other things, help displace the universal presumptions of a historically contingent Eurocentric mode of analysis infused with a Protestant ethos (Spickard 2017). As Britain’s Muslim communities continue to mature and—as many of the contributions to this Special Issue already demonstrate—confidently take ownership of their own narratives, an organic conceptual apparatus may crystallise that speaks to the authentic core of their experience in ways that segue naturally with the nation’s religious heritage (Birt et al. 2011).

### 3. Practitioner Perspectives

In keeping with the ethos of the conference and our wish to incorporate practitioner perspectives into this Special Issue, we proactively sought contributions that reflect the context and experiences of those charged with the practical delivery of Muslim religious leadership education and co-ordination. With the exception of the paper prepared by those associated with the Muslim Council of Britain who chose to write a full-length academic piece, we offered practitioners the opportunity to draft shorter papers of around one thousand words, describing the origins and activities of institutions with which they were associated (in various capacities and at different times), the challenges faced and overcome, and the overall vision for the future. The following paragraphs reflect a systematic analysis by the editors of six such contributions. Having drafted the following paragraphs, we shared them with our contributors, giving them the opportunity to correct any errors of fact or interpretation. Our contributors include, in alphabetical order: Qari Asim (Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board—MINAB, established in 2006); Sheikh Shams Ad Duha (Ebrahim College, established in 2003); Dr Musharraf Hussain (Karimia Institute, established in 1990); Dr Mohammad Mesbahi (The Islamic College, established in 1998); Mufti Dr Abdur Rahman Mangera (Whitethread Institute, established in 2017); and, Muhammad Tajri (Al-Mahdi Institute, established in 1993).

Despite their different histories and priorities, the origins, trajectories, challenges, and priorities of these institutions directly reflect the changing needs and dynamics of British Muslim communities more broadly. They mirror the emergent needs of new generations and the experiences of founding leaders, many of whom have acquired postgraduate degrees from British universities. Common to each there is a clear but gradual shift away from a reliance on overseas institutions for ‘endorsement’ or teaching staff, alongside the emergence of highly capable and qualified leaders born and educated in Britain. Together, these institutions are ‘indigenising’ Islamic education for its British context, seeking to find models of education that are true to their origins while being ‘fit for purpose’ for the future.

Many of those associated with these Institutes have critically evaluated the delivery of Islamic Studies programmes in universities. They have sought to develop their institutions in ways that reflect ‘best practice’ in the higher education sector while being cautious of replicating aspects of teaching and learning that may not be helpful to their interests. For example, there is a recognition of the value of inter-disciplinary study, research-led teaching, the need to provide flexible programmes for part-time and distance learners, and the benefits arising from research seminars with invited external speakers. Some have responded to the emphasis that many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) now place

upon 'employability skills', and have therefore created volunteering, placement, and work experience opportunities within the curriculum. In some cases, degree programmes in Islamic institutions have been validated by local universities, suggesting recognition of the value of transparent processes and standards for admission, assessment, and regulation.

However, programmes of Islamic Studies in many British universities were seen by those from some Institutes as too heavily orientated towards historical, linguistic, and textual approaches, at the expense of attention to Islamic spirituality, personal self-development, contemporary issues, and an appreciation of Islam in its British, inter-religious context. The same sort of criticisms were also voiced in relation to some traditional Islamic Studies programmes within the seminary sector. While appreciating and recognising their invaluable contributions, especially at a particular time of energetic British Muslim community institution-building in the 1970s and 1980s, many of those who contributed to our conference were seeking to create institutions that could build on these foundations in new ways to reflect emergent needs. They were concerned that insufficient contextualisation of Islamic education and leadership training (regardless of sector) can lead to a "disconnect with the changing paradigms of a constantly changing world" (Mangera). Crucially, many of those who have been most directly involved in efforts to develop new institutions have managed to bridge the gap between the confessional and non-confessional study of Islam as graduates of both the traditional seminary and HEI sectors. This makes them pioneering figures who have much to contribute to ongoing developments that seek to close the gap between these sectors (Geaves 2013; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015).<sup>2</sup> What this seems to amount to in some cases is a gradual blurring of the distinction between academia and the traditional seminary sector, with "the deep-seated regard for the traditional Islamic sciences . . . embedded in a culture of academic critical thinking" (Tajri).

Another indicator of important generational and pedagogical shifts includes the priority that many institutes now place upon the Arabic language. For several decades, Islamic seminaries with origins in South Asia paid particular attention to the advanced acquisition of the Urdu language. This was a natural and inevitable consequence of their history and the background of their founding leaders. However, with the passage of time, it has become clear that proficiency in the language of the Qur'an and the Hadith is now more likely to provide the basis for claims of "scholarship and credibility" (Ad Duha). Similarly, there is a recognition in many institutes that alongside the development of employability skills, the basic literacy of students in written English is a concern. Students enrolling on the training and educational programmes offered by various non-residential Islamic institutions also inevitably bring the daily socio-economic challenges of British Muslim communities with them. This can result in cohorts of students with considerable personal, family, and health problems, making the "contextualisation of the Muslim seminary more a pastoral challenge than an academic one" (Ad Duha).

But in parallel with this, there is sufficient growth and maturity in the Islamic education and training sector for the development of highly specialised, advanced, 'postgraduate-level' study (Mesbahi, Tajri, Mangera). Those who have undertaken their studies in the traditional Darul Uloom sector have, until recently, had few options in terms of developing their knowledge to a higher level *within* the UK. In relation to the private Islamic education sector, the creation of the Whitethread Institute is a particularly notable development, enabling both male and female '*alims* and '*alimas* of the highest capabilities to undertake programmes in very advanced Islamic jurisprudence, Qur'anic exegesis, and Islamic Theology. A particular speciality of the Institute is the *Ifta* course, where deep engagement with advanced juridical texts is allied with close mentoring. The rigours of the course are such that only the most capable students complete it, but the outcome is the production of scholars who can specialise in various aspects of Islamic law at the most advanced level. Such is the sensitivity of issuing *fatawa* (non-binding religious edicts) that even those who complete the course are required

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<sup>2</sup> Cheruvallil-Contractor, Sariya, 2012–2013, 'Collaborative partnerships between universities and Muslim institutions: dismantling the roadblocks', UKRI-ESRC research project, University of Derby.

“to work in various capacities in the field, providing legal responses for another three years before they would be accredited as muftis” (Mangera). The emergence of such a specialist institute is indicative of a likely future trend in relation to Muslim religious leadership in Britain, in terms of the expansion of the ‘advanced’ traditional Islamic sciences sector.

Alongside the development of ‘specialisation’, there is also a growing emphasis on ‘professionalisation’ of private Muslim higher education. The well-established Karimia Institute has a long-standing reputation for its programmes but has recognised the need for graduates to be ‘work-ready’ as imams, chaplains, youth workers, and so on. This reflects both the expansion in the kind of roles that Darul Uloom graduates might occupy, but also the parallel development of functions that mosque-based imams are expected to fulfil, and the range of external agencies they are likely to have to engage with (e.g., National Health Service, local politicians, police, local religious leaders, interfaith bodies, and so on). “Forty to fifty years ago, when many of the mosques and Muslim institutions started, Muslim communities were smaller and perhaps more insular; the mosque leadership was confined to preaching inside the four walls of the mosque buildings. In present times, sophisticated demands are being made on mosques to represent and lead communities, through an efficient, inclusive, innovative, and sustainable provision of services” (Asim). In view of this, the proposed new Diploma in Imam Training at the Karimia Institute aims to equip Islamic leaders with some key ‘competencies’, including self-reflective personal development and spirituality; teaching and pedagogy; youth and community work; leadership and management training; mosque governance and management committees; and an ability to undertake effective *da’wa* (lit: invitation) using social and other media. Underpinning all these is an emphasis on contextualisation of the Islamic tradition, continuous professional development, and the need for the development of a clear ‘career-path’ for those working in a vocational capacity. In this way, the kind of career-structure and remuneration arrangements of the Christian churches has provided a useful ‘model’ from which indigenous ones may develop.

A very striking theme to emerge in many contributions was the importance of facilitating the education of Muslim women on a par with their male counterparts. Clearly, this has involved attention to issues of cultural sensitivity and avoidance of free-mixing between the genders, but the important role that women have as educators in the community was consistently acknowledged. Indeed, in some of the institutes, women form the majority of the student body and regularly outperform their male colleagues (Ad Duha). Compared to their brothers, women were sometimes (but not always) found to have more time, opportunity, and inclination to undertake advanced Islamic Studies. But this spirit of inclusivity was also evident in other ways. Several contributors stressed the ‘non-sectarian’ nature of their institutes (Mesbahi), and the need to engage in both intra- and inter-religious dialogue. In some institutes, there was a clear sense of transcending particular denominational identities and moving toward a broad Muslim one facilitated perhaps through regular contact with Muslim ‘others’—especially in cities of ‘hyper-diversity’, such as London, where Muslims of varied origins mingle closely. Such a culture of inclusivity also manifests in some institutions through questioning and discussion via seminars, conferences, and workshops that host external speakers from a range of academic and denominational backgrounds (Tajri). Far from being internally focused, students are encouraged to consider the ways in which ‘traditionally’ received Islamic knowledge can be seen through outward-facing contemporary lenses.

#### 4. Conclusions

Several common themes of ‘contextualisation’, ‘indigenisation’, ‘engagement’, ‘inclusivity’, and ‘professionalisation’ emerge from the various practitioner contributions submitted to this Special Issue. These indicate the successful transmission of models of Islamic educational training and leadership into Britain, and their organic if gradual development to cater to the demands of changing circumstances and new generations. While the institutions and their founders value their relationships with older, more ‘traditional’ organisations, established in the UK or operating overseas—sometimes their alma maters—it is clear that they seek to draw upon this heritage to address the challenges and

needs of their own context and lived reality. Deciding ‘what counts’ as a Darul Uloom or ‘traditional’ Islamic curriculum is therefore no longer clear; some institutions appear to be walking a tightrope in terms of their underlying purpose, whether this is flexible, locally-delivered Islamic education, the preservation and protection of the Islamic tradition in contemporary Britain, or the training of Muslim faith leaders. Clearly, the cultivation of both a ‘Republic of Letters’ and a ‘Republic of Piety’, to use Moosa’s terms (Moosa 2015), is important for many of our contributors. There is also a sense, however, of a multitude of disconnected institutions and initiatives, which, despite their overlapping interests, work largely independently of each other. The remit of MINAB and the newly-created BBSI (British Board of Scholars and Imams), alongside organisations such as Faith Associates, for example, is unclear—at least from the outside. There are missed opportunities for the sharing of best practice and experience, more joined-up thinking, and avoidance of pitfalls in a sector that is vulnerable to changing markets, politicisation, and, quite often, negative media scrutiny.

These are perhaps unavoidable factors in the gradual maturation of British Muslim leadership, tied into its essentially privatised role following a range of post-war immigration flows. The UK is unusual among secular democracies for maintaining an established church that continues to have a formal role in UK legislature, and its most senior cleric, the Archbishop of Canterbury, frequently presides over state functions. The Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth is similarly a formally recognised office providing leadership for British Jews. No such equivalent exists for British Muslims. While there is some evidence that the prominent Victorian Muslim convert Abdullah Quilliam received a (perhaps de facto more than de jure) title of the ‘Sheikh-ul-Islam of the British Isles’ from the Ottoman caliph Sultan Abdul Hamid II in 1894, this—as Birt (2008b) argues—was a pre-eminently symbolic appointment lacking ratification from the Queen. In 2011, Maulana Shahid Raza, then Chairman of MINAB, suggested there is “strong support from diverse parts of the Muslim community for a Grand Mufti for the UK”, further alluding to an “independent appointments committee of leading Al-Azhar scholars” which had allegedly appointed an incumbent to the office (Raza 2011); a claim which “irritated and confused” other British Muslims (Binyon 2011). Both instances indicate the tendency of British Muslim leadership to lean upon overseas centres of religious authority in validating their own credentials. While pioneering migrant ulema from Britain’s South Asian communities—such as the late Shaykh Yusuf Motala or Shaykh Muhammad Imdad Hussain Pirzada Sahib, each of whom founded UK institutions that have produced generations of Islamic scholars—are highly revered *within* their communities, they are largely unknown outside of them.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the cultural versatility of converts such as Quilliam—or, more recently, Shaykh Abdal Hakim Murad—provides important ‘bridging capital’, which allows the development of more prominent public profiles. In any case, the question of whether a single Islamic figure could occupy a formally instituted position within the British establishment, mirroring the roles of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Chief Rabbi, and walk the tightrope of publicly representing Britain’s diverse Muslim communities without losing grassroots credibility, remains an open one.

Universities may have little role to play in addressing these issues, but our conference in 2019 was an historic occasion for bringing together key stakeholders in the same place on the same day. The relative ‘neutrality’ of a university environment provided a context where practitioners from very different kinds of institutions could meet and talk together, sometimes for the first time. Unlike politically sensitive government initiatives to address issues around Muslim faith leader training (Mukadam and Scott-Baumann 2010), our conference was able to draw upon many years of relationship-building across a very wide range of Muslim institutions and long-standing personal connections. It was a privilege to host such an occasion in Cardiff University, and the production of this Special Issue offers an academic landmark for documenting the clear leadership and educational progress of British Muslim communities.

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<sup>3</sup> For more on Shaykh Yusuf Motala, see Mangera (2020, pp. 190–92); and Shaykh Muhammad Imdad Hussain Pirzada, see MuslimView (2015) or Schleifer (2020, p. 124).

The papers in this Special Issue should therefore be read alongside the recordings made at the conference itself. These can be found on the Islam-UK Centre YouTube channel and feature presentations from a range of key academics and community activists—such as Dr Usama al-Azami, Professor Gary Bunt, Dr Myriam François-Cerrah, Dr Atif Imtiaz, Dr Shuruq Naguib, Rehanah Sadiq, Professor Ataullah Siddiqui and Shaukat Warraich—who were not able to contribute to the Special Issue.<sup>4</sup> It was also a pleasure to host a contingent of young Darul Uloom students, many of whom travelled hundreds of miles to attend an academic conference for the first time.

The unfolding of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 coincided with the final stages of this Special Issue's preparation, and the debates it sparked in Muslim communities across the UK, particularly on the question of voluntary mosque closures, brought into sharp relief many of the issues of leadership, authority, and representation addressed herein (Timol 2020). Sadly, one of the earliest fatalities of the coronavirus was a vivacious character of British Islam, Fuad Nahdi (1957–2020), whose larger-than-life personality and myriad contributions to British Muslim community life—including his spearheading of Q-News, “the most consequential UK Muslim publication of its day”—are captured in Yahya Birt's obituary. Figures such as Nahdi represent both the ‘inward’ and ‘outward’ orientations of British Muslim leadership suggested earlier in this Introduction. Intimately concerned with Muslim community issues, well-connected with a plethora of international ulema, and particularly committed to nurturing and mentoring a younger generation of talented British Muslims, Nahdi was simultaneously exceptionally well-networked in media, policy, and interfaith circles in the British establishment. In a sense, he was a type of ‘Chief Playmaker’ of British Islam and it is an honour for us to formally document his life achievements and service to the community within the pages of this Special Issue.

The occasion of our conference also provided an opportunity to introduce a new flagship project at the Islam-UK Centre. ‘Understanding British Imams’ is the first sustained academic study of the UK imamate, with a clear focus on the role of those responsible for leading worship in British mosques on a day-to-day basis.<sup>5</sup> The overwhelming response to an initial online survey, and the willingness of a wide cross-section of imams and other stakeholders to contribute their views through interviews, suggests a strong level of grassroots support for rigorous yet empathic social scientific understanding of key Muslim community issues. We hope that our findings will support Muslim communities at all levels by providing an evidence-based assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the current arrangements for the employment and work of imams. In generating meticulously gathered empirical data, our work can provide an important reference point for the future development of Muslim educational and training institutions and help imams serve their congregations more effectively. This is no less than Muslim communities deserve:

“Muslims who go to their place of worship regularly in an increasingly secular world go because their faith really matters to them—because their religion, and their community, [are] among the most prominent anchors of their life, supporting and sustaining them through times of trial and joy, crisis and celebration. These people deserve to be well cared for, represented, [and] inspired by those who are entrusted with their care” (Asim).

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<sup>4</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLr1Tq3qoUBQ9ZJepFCGqi\\_CBdtW6tMIT](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLr1Tq3qoUBQ9ZJepFCGqi_CBdtW6tMIT) (accessed on 23 August 2020).

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/research/explore/find-a-project/view/understanding-british-imams> (accessed on 23 August 2020).

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