

ISLAM, LOVE & MARRIAGE : NEW CHOICES FOR A NEW WORLD

Santi Rozario
and
Geoffrey Samuel

Findings from a research project on Young
Bangladeshis in Bangladesh and the UK

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1. General Introduction¹

The research project which gave rise to this report, ‘The Challenge of Islam: Young Bangladeshis, Marriage and Family in Bangladesh and the UK,’ is a study of how young Bangladeshi Muslims think about marriage and the family. It was funded by a three-year Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, UK) research grant, ending in March 2011,² and based at Cardiff University.

‘The Challenge of Islam: Young Bangladeshis, Marriage and Family in Bangladesh and the UK’ is one of a number of projects organised by the Research Group on the Body, Health and Religion, which is based in the School of History, Archaeology and Religion at Cardiff University. The project team consisted of two senior academics, Santi Rozario, who was principal investigator, and Geoffrey Samuel, who was co-investigator. It also included a part-time research assistant, Bulbul Ashraf Siddiqi, and a part-time administrative officer, Alvina Gillani.

The project was designed as an anthropological study of transformations in how young Bangladeshi Muslims in the UK and in Bangladesh thought about personal relationships, marriage, and the family. A central issue for the research was the influence of various contemporary versions of Islam, including the so-called ‘Islamist’ or ‘fundamentalist’ movements (see section 5, below). While these groups generally present themselves, in various ways, as interpretations for the present day of a religion whose core message remains unchanged since the time of the Prophet Muhammad, they are contemporary movements responding to present-day problems, and we use the term ‘modernist’ here, despite certain inadequacies, as a generic term for them all.

We suggested in our research proposal that much of the appeal of these modernist interpretations of Islam, for young Bangladeshi Muslims and for others, might lie in their ability to offer solutions to the problems faced by young people in a rapidly changing social and economic environment. Young Muslims today, we suggested, are constructing and negotiating their personal identities and their sense of self in a radically new context, shaped by these new Islamic conceptions of marriage and the family as well as by secular, Westernised images of the nuclear family and romantic love.

Much research on young British Muslims in recent years has looked at the Muslim population as a whole, treating differences between ethnic origin as secondary or unimportant.³ While there are problems in treating young people as defined primarily by their ethnic origins, and there is an increasing sense in which young Muslims in

¹ The initial version of this report was released at a workshop at the Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, Department of World Religions and Cultures, Dhaka University on Friday, January 7th, 2011; the revised version was released at a workshop at Cardiff University on Wednesday, March 23rd 2011. We thank Prof Kazi Nurul Islam of Dhaka University and Mr Saleem Kidwai of the Muslim Council of Wales for their generous assistance in arranging and chairing these events. The report is available online at www.bodyhealthreligion.org.uk/BAHAR/ and at the ESRC Society Today website.

² ‘The Challenge of Islam: Young Bangladeshis, Marriage and Family in Bangladesh and the UK’ (RES-062-23-0616)

³ A few studies have looked more specifically at South Asian Muslims, but even in these cases there has been a tendency to treat the larger and somewhat longer-established Pakistani population as representative. There are however important differences between Bangladeshis and the various UK Pakistani populations in many respects, including kinship and family structure as well as religious practice.

the UK from different ethnic backgrounds are developing a sense of common identity, we deliberately chose to focus on the Bangladeshi population in the UK, and to see them in relation to Bangladeshis in Bangladesh itself. The intention was not so much to compare Bangladesh and the UK, although there are significant areas of comparison and contrast between the two populations, but to see young people as living within a total field of which both Bangladesh and the UK were significant parts.

The need to see the situation in terms of this total field is particularly important when it comes to marriage, since the older generation of British Bangladeshis is often strongly oriented, for a variety of reasons, towards arranging marriages for their children with partners back in their communities of origin in Bangladesh. As we will see, this is a major issue and a major source of conflict between parental and younger generations in many UK Bangladeshi families. In Bangladesh too, the prospect of migration, either through marriage or through higher education and employment overseas, plays an important role in the lives of many young people and their parents.

Connections between the home and diasporic communities are also important in relation to religion and culture. Many British Bangladeshis maintain close ties with shrines and religious organisations in Bangladesh. British Bangladeshis are also a major factor in the transformation of Islam in Bangladesh, particularly in Sylhet where they often seek to influence their family members to adopt modernist forms of Islam and reject established practices such as devotion to holy men and shrines.

The funded section of our project is now almost over. While we expect to be publishing material from the project for some years to come, we felt that this was a good time to make some of our results available to people in the UK and Bangladesh. A dissemination meeting was held at Dhaka University on January 7, 2011, chaired by Professor Kazi Nurul Islam of the Department of World Religions and Culture, and hosted by the University's Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue, when an earlier version of this report was circulated. A second dissemination meeting is taking place at Cardiff University on March 23, 2011, chaired by Mr Saleem Kidwai of the Muslim Council of Wales, and supported by the Muslim Council of Wales, Muslim Youth Wales, Cardiff University Islamic Society and the Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK.

The next section of the report gives a brief introduction to the study population, and it is followed by two short sections discussing Bangladesh and the British Bangladeshi community respectively. The subsequent sections present some key findings of our research.

2. The Study Population

In the course of this project, Santi Rozario, Bulbul Ashraf Siddiqi and Geoffrey Samuel interviewed 112 young Bangladeshis in Bangladesh and the UK, as well as carrying out 31 focus groups and 23 interviews with religious and community leaders and other people. Where possible, we interviewed young people on several different occasions, so as to get to know them better, and to track the changes in their perspectives over time. In some cases, we have been able to interview individuals and couples before and after marriage. We have also spent time getting to know many of

the young people and their families, participating in their activities and becoming familiar with their lives.

In the UK we interviewed young Bangladeshis in the London, Birmingham and Cardiff areas, and in Bangladesh our interviewees came from Dhaka and Sylhet cities.

The sample was recruited through a variety of methods, including personal contacts, replies to notices on Islamic e-mail groups, people met through talks and focus groups organized by academic colleagues, and attendance by the researchers at a variety of Islamic events. The aim was to get to know a range of people with varying degrees of Islamic commitment, including both active members of Islamic groups and non-members. While the focus both in the UK and in Bangladesh was mainly on young people who had become seriously involved in Islamic practice in other ways, we also interviewed many young people who were less involved in religion and had more ‘secular’ life-styles.

Most of our sample in both countries is from middle-class, educated urban backgrounds. This partly reflects our recruitment strategies, but it also reflects the fact that it is this sector of the young Muslim population that has the leisure, ability and interest to devote to high levels of personal religious commitment. These people have come into Islam of their own accord after having been exposed to contemporary expressions of Islamic reform movements through friends or relatives, or through literature, learning sessions, and various other different media including Islamic TV channels and programmes. We were interested in the personal motivations of these young people, who generally saw a strong contrast between their Islam and that of their parents’ generation, and in the way in which these new forms of Islam were becoming part of their everyday lives, particularly in terms of personal relationships, marriage and the family.

A breakdown of the interviewees is given in Tables 1 to 4:

	Young People				Other Interviewees	Total
	Unmarried		Married			
	F	M	F	M		
Bangladesh	16	36	11	14	19	96
United Kingdom	10	16	5	4	4	39

Table 1: Individual interviewees (main project)⁴

	Focus Groups
Bangladesh	25
United Kingdom	6

Table 2: Focus Groups (main project)

⁴ Many of the interviewees were interviewed on several occasions, so the actual number of interviews is considerably larger than the figures given here. Some interviewees became married in the course of the study; we have listed them under their initial status here.

A further series of 28 interviews and 3 focus groups were carried out using the same methodology by Bulbul Ashraf Siddiqi as part of his doctoral research on the Tablighi Jama'at in Bangladesh and the UK. These used the same methodology and approach, so they also provided information for the wider project. Details are given in Tables 3 and 4.

	Young People				Other Interviewees	Total
	Unmarried		Married			
	F	M	F	M		
Bangladesh	-	11	-	4	4	19
United Kingdom	-	5	1	3	-	9

Table 3: Individual interviewees (Siddiqi's doctoral project)

	Focus Groups
Bangladesh	3
United Kingdom	1

Table 4: Focus Groups (Siddiqi's doctoral project)

3. Bangladesh and Bangladeshi Islam

Islam in East Bengal and East Pakistan until 1970

The population of Bangladesh was estimated in 2009 as around 156 million, of whom nearly 90% are Muslim. Most Bangladeshis in Bangladesh, as well as most Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom, come from a Muslim background, and Islam is an important part of Bangladeshi society both in the countryside and in the cities.

'Traditional' Islam in Bangladesh, as in the wider Bengali region, has generally been described as tolerant, syncretistic and Sufi-influenced. The story of the conversion of Bengal to Islam is associated with the legends of great Sufi saints such as Shah Jalal and his followers in Sylhet. Islam has coexisted for many centuries with a layer of religious practice that is often described as 'Hindu' but is really neither Hindu nor Muslim, consisting of forms of folk religious practice shared across religious boundaries. These include, for example, rituals to do with marriage, childbirth and rice cultivation. Shrines (*mazar*) associated with Sufi saints of the past remain centres of healing, and holy men still play an important role in healing at village level.

Historically, Wahhabi-inspired Islamic reform movements reached East Bengal in the early 19th century, as part of a package of resistance to British rule, its financial exortions and its destruction of the local economy. The Faraizi movement, founded in the 1820s by Haji Shariatullah (1786-1831) had considerable influence through Muslim areas of East Bengal. The various Islamic reform movements from the late 19th century onwards, mostly inspired by the new madrasa (Darul Uloom) founded at Deoband in 1866, however, had relatively little effect on East Bengal until the early

1950s, when East Bengal constituted the eastern wing of the newly independent state of Pakistan. Islamic movements in East Bengal in the first half of the 20th century were more concerned with supporting the social, economic and political demands of the Muslim population in relation to Hindu domination, than with reforming people's religious life.

Two religious reform movements that were to remain prominent until modern times became established in Bangladesh during the period of Pakistani rule. These were the Tablighi Jama'at and the Jama'ati Islami. The Tablighi Jama'at was and remains a pietist movement, originally founded in India in the 1920s under Deobandi influence. It avoids direct political involvement and focuses on influencing the religious behaviour of the Muslim population. The Jama'ati Islami, which was to become the principal Islamic political party in independent Bangladesh, was different, since it had from its formation in 1941 by Syed Abul Ala Maududi (1903-79) a strong orientation towards religious reform alongside its political programme. The Jama'ati Islami had an East Pakistan chapter from 1948 onwards, though the leadership was initially non-Bengali, and it only acquired a Bengali leadership in 1956.

Religion, Politics and Identity in Independent Bangladesh

The achievement of Bangladeshi independence from Pakistan in 1971 effectively destroyed the idea of a shared political identity with Muslims elsewhere in South Asia. Bangladeshi identity was defined by two negatives; the rejection of united India in 1947 and the rejection of united Pakistan in 1971. Henceforward, by default, Bangladeshi identity was to be primarily based around a shared Bengali Muslim identity, but this left open which of the two components, Bengali or Muslim, was the most significant. That has remained a contested issue up to the present day.

In practice, a polarisation took place within Bangladeshi politics between a 'Bengali' identity (secular, left-wing and socialist inclined) and a 'Bangladeshi' identity (Islamic, right-wing and politically conservative). The first option crystallised around the Awami League of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, which formed the first government of independent Bangladesh in 1972, and second around the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) founded by General Zia ur-Rahman, which took over power after Sheikh Mujib's assassination in 1975 and ruled until General Zia's own death in an attempted coup in 1981. The Bangladeshi political scene in recent years has been characterised by an alternation between these two approaches.

The Constitution of independent Bangladesh as originally written at the time of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was explicitly secular, meaning that all religions were to be treated equally and that none had a special status. Political parties based on a religious programme, of which the most significant was the Jama'ati Islami, were prohibited. This prohibition was in part a response to the role played by the Jama'ati Islami during the War of Independence, when the party opposed the war and its student organisation fought on the Pakistani side.

The commitment to a secular Bangladesh was progressively weakened during the military governments of General Zia and General Ershad. The wording of the Constitution was changed in the late 1970s, and the prohibition on religion-based parties removed. Islam was recognized as the state religion through the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution in 1988. These changes are being reversed under the present Awami League government.

In practice, however, while the BNP has been more supportive than the Awami League of an Islamic identity for Bangladesh, neither of the two main parties is opposed to Islam, and neither has been seriously interested in establishing a fully Islamic state in Bangladesh.

The Jama'ati Islami and the Movement for an Islamic State in Bangladesh

The argument for an Islamic state in Bangladesh has been left to the Jama'ati Islami and to smaller religious parties, and with the exception of the Jama'ati Islami none of these has been of real significance in Bangladeshi politics.⁵ The Jama'ati Islami, which continued on an underground basis after its prohibition, was allowed to reform in the late 1970s during the Zia government. It became by far the most significant Islamic political party, with 12% of the overall vote and 18 seats in Parliament in the 1991 elections.

While the Jama'ati Islami in its present form is a specifically Bangladeshi political party, it has retained unofficial links with the Jama'ati Islami in Pakistan and elsewhere. The party also reconstituted its student branch, the Islami Chhatra Shibir, which became a major force on several university campuses. However, along with the BNP, it performed very poorly in the 2008 elections, and won only two seats. The Bangladesh Supreme Court reimposed the ban on religious political parties in July 2010, and most of the leading figures of the Jama'ati Islami are currently on trial for war crime charges, so the future of the party is in serious doubt.

The Jama'ati Islami is likely to remain however a significant force in Bangladeshi politics for the foreseeable future, because of its strong and disciplined organisational base in the universities and in civil society. The Jama'ati Islami operates as a highly centralised organisation, on the model of the Communist Party under Lenin, with an internal training programme and successive grades of membership. Unlike the BNP and Awami League, it is not generally seen as internally corrupt.

The Jama'ati Islami also maintains a range of enterprises, such as the Ibn Sina medical clinics, that provide employment for its members and look after them in various ways. These organisations, and the party's work in local communities, have helped to build up a popular base for the party. The Jama'ati Islami's student branches are particularly strong in the Universities of Rajshahi and Chittagong, but there is also a quite substantial presence in the Dhaka universities, and we met and interviewed several members of the party's student organizations in Dhaka. In religious terms, the Jama'ati Islami in Bangladesh seems to have moved away from an exclusive reliance on the writings of Maududi, but it retains a conservative moral outlook and a commitment to the creation of an Islamic state.

The Tablighi Jama'at and Islamic Reform in Bangladesh

By far the largest religious organisation in Bangladesh in terms of active membership is the Tablighi Jama'at. The Tablighi Jama'at is a global organisation founded

⁵ A group of small religious parties contested recent elections as a united front, the Islami Oikya Jote. They won 2 seats in the 2001 election, and along with the Jama'ati Islami formed part of the BNP-led alliance that governed Bangladesh between 2001 and 2006. One component of the Islami Oikya Jote, the Jamaat-e-Ulama Islam Bangladesh, also has a significant presence in the UK. No Islami Oikya Jote MPs were elected in the 2008 general election.

originally in India in the 1920s, in the context of growing Hindu-Muslim polarisation among the Meo people of Mewar, by Maulana Mohammad Ilyas (1985-1944). The movement spread to other parts of India, including Pakistan and Bangladesh and now operates almost in every country in the world. The world headquarters remains in India, at Nizamuddin in New Delhi, and while the organization presents itself as non-hierarchical the family of Mohammad Ilyas at Nizamuddin remain very influential.

The Tablighi Jama'at has been extensively studied, but the Bangladeshi branch has received relatively little attention in comparison with research on the organisation elsewhere in South Asia and globally, and one of our team, Bulbul Ashraf Siddiqi, is working on the Tablighi Jama'at in Bangladesh for his doctoral dissertation.

The Tablighi Jama'at in Bangladesh as elsewhere claims to be a non-political movement working purely for religious revival (*da'wah* in Arabic, *dawat* in Bangla), an approach that has enabled it to receive support from all parts of the political spectrum. As in other countries where it operates, the movement stresses Islamic piety in everyday life and inculcates this through a system of travelling mission journeys in which members participate regularly. The aim is for members to encourage individual Muslims to return to the way of the Prophet Mohammad, and to develop spiritually themselves through undertaking this missionising activity.

Moulana Ashiq Elahi's *Six Points of Tabligh* states that Tablighi followers should

get rid of worldly engagements, to serve Allah and His true religion. In this course, a believer should join the group of the Preachers of Islam, and should call those to the Right Path, who are lost in this fleeting world, and have forgotten immortal life hereafter. [. . .] The true following of the Holy prophet requires that every Muslim should devote himself to his service, and should sacrifice every thing for the preaching of his true religion (Islam). (p.39)

Tablighi teachings place emphasis on spiritual reward (*sowab*) for proper Islamic observance and on working for spiritual renewal. Tablighi followers can put their old lives behind them and start again as a Muslim.

The Tablighi Jama'at in its early years was strongly opposed to 'Hinduising' and popular practices, including those associated with Sufi shrines and *pirs*, and it retains this orientation in many countries where it operates. In the Bangladeshi context, however, this side of the Tabligh's position appears to be relatively less important. There is widespread support for Sufi shrines and other popular practices among the Bangladeshi population, with all political parties paying at least nominal respect to major shrines and *pirs*, and Tablighi rhetoric in this area does not seem to have led to any systematic action to prevent those practices which the movement sees as non-Islamic (*bid'at* or *shirk*). Thus, while the Tablighi's annual gatherings (Bishwa Ijtema) at Tongi, near Dhaka, bring together several million people to take part in common religious activities, the movement's ideological impact in Bangladesh appears to be less than one might expect from the vast numbers involved.

Indeed, a notable feature of the Bangladeshi religious landscape is the relative absence of the tension between reformist or fundamentalist approaches ('Deobandi,' Ahle Hadith) and more traditionally aligned approaches found in India and Pakistan and replicated in the UK. There are certainly groups in Bangladesh, like the Tablighi Jama'at, whose position is broadly 'Deobandi' in its opposition to traditional shrine

culture, *milad* observance⁶ and other features opposed by Deobandi groups, and there are also many madrasas aligned with Deoband or Ahle Hadith, particularly in the Qoumi (non-State) madrasa sector. There appears, however, to be little overt tension or conflict with a Bangladeshi religious mainstream that still generally supports traditional shrine culture, *milad* observance and related practices. Perhaps this is a consequence of the overall political and religious dynamic of Bangladesh, which remains far more concerned with the question of political Islam, as with the Jama'ati Islami, than with specific issues of religious observance. Dominant elites behind both the main parties have no interest in alienating potential supporters on either traditional and reformist sides of the religious spectrum.

The main exception here appears to be Sylhet, where Bangladeshis who have become committed to reformist positions in the UK have returned to Bangladesh with the aim of 'purifying' Islamic observance in their homeland. This is not to say that there has been no public conflict in Bangladesh over Islamic observance, but such incidents as have occurred, such as the bombings of the Shahjalal shrine in 2004, seem to be the result of small extremist groups and to have little wider support.

4. Bangladeshis in the United Kingdom

The British Bangladeshi community

The majority of the British Bangladeshi community, which now numbers around half a million, originated in the massive migration from Sylhet in the 1960s and 1970s, mostly coming from uneducated rural backgrounds. Sylhet formed part of Assam rather than Bengal during the latter part of British rule, and it remains a distinctive region within contemporary Bangladesh. It has a strong local religious identity based around the Sufi saint Shah Jalal and his followers, who are said to have converted the area to Islam in the 14th century.

A second, mostly more recent, wave of migrants originates mostly from educated urban backgrounds, mainly in Dhaka. For the most part, these two components of British Bangladeshi society, originating from very different social backgrounds and speaking languages which are barely mutually intelligible, remain separate, with their own communal organizations and institutions.⁷

The British Bangladeshi community today has high rates of unemployment, and in other ways as well is one of the most disadvantaged of major migrant communities. Most British Bangladeshis live in a number of high-density urban communities, the largest being in London, Birmingham, Oldham, Luton and Bradford. The Cardiff-Newport area has around 2000 Bangladeshis.

⁶ *Milad* (= Arabic *mawlid*) is the commemoration of the birthday of the Prophet. It is traditionally an important observance in South Asia as in many parts of the Muslim world, but is regarded as an improper innovation (*bid'ah*) by many scholars from Deobandi and Salafi backgrounds.

⁷ In fact there were small minorities from other parts of Bangladesh, including the urban centres of Dhaka and Chittagong, among the early migrants. For further discussion of differences within the UK community, see S. Rozario with S. Gilliat-Ray (2007), 'Genetics, Religion and Identity: A Study of British Bangladeshis (2004-7).' Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Working Paper No.93.

Islam among British Bangladeshis

The half million Bangladeshis form part of a wider South Asian Muslim community in the UK. This includes the longer-established Pakistani community, of around 1.2 million, and originating mainly from Kashmir (Mirpur) and the Punjab, and around 300,000 Indian and Sri Lankan Muslims. The various South Asian communities together make up the vast majority of the UK's Muslim population. While differences in language and culture tend to limit social interaction between Bangladeshis and other groups, major South Asian-derived Islamic movements, including the Jama'ati Islami and Tablighi Jama'at, operate across the entire South Asian population.

South Asian Islam in the UK is often described in terms of a polarity between 'Deobandi' and more traditionalist ('Barelvi'/Ahle Sunnat wal Jama'at)⁸ approaches. Mosques patronized by South Asians in the UK are generally clearly aligned with specific religious orientations, including the 'Deobandi' and 'Barelvi' groups as well as the Deoband-aligned Tablighi Jama'at. They are often also supported mainly by one or another ethnic group (Bangladeshi, Pakistani etc). Thus Cardiff, like other provincial cities with substantial Muslim populations, has Deobandi mosques with Tablighi Jama'at sympathies, Jama'at-affiliated mosques, and more traditionally oriented mosques, many of them ethnically linked.

The majority of British *madrasas* and Muslim training centres follow the Deoband model. One exception is the Sufi-aligned Hijaz College, an institution founded by a hereditary Pakistani Sufi sheikh with whom a number of our young Bangladeshis were associated.⁹

The Tablighi Jama'at

The Tablighi Jama'at is active in the UK. While it has recruited more successfully among UK Pakistanis than among Bangladeshis, it has a substantial following among Bangladeshis as well. The major Tablighi centre (*markaz*) is in Dewsbury, but most cities with South Asian Muslim populations have one or more mosques sympathetic to the Tablighis, which can serve as a base for mission activities among local Muslims.

The movement in the UK retains the emphasizing on mission activity and personal piety characteristic of its original south Asian form. It does not however seem to be making major inroads among young Bangladeshis in the UK.

The Jama'ati Islami, Hizbut Tahrir and Political Islam in the UK

The Jama'ati Islami is also an active part of British Muslim politics, though again more of its support comes from British Pakistanis than from Bangladeshis. As in Bangladesh, the Jama'ati Islami sponsors and supports a variety of organisations that

⁸ The term Barelvi derives from the movement founded at Bareilly by Ahmed Raza Khan Barelvi (1856-1921). Raza Khan himself used the term Ahle Sunnat wal Jama'at ('people of the tradition and the congregation') and this term is also used by some traditionally-inclined South Asian Muslims.

⁹ Another 'Barelvi'-style grouping among the British Bangladeshis derives from the Sylheti *pir* (Sufi teacher) Abdul Latif Chowdhury (1913-2008), also known as Saheb Qibla Fultali, who visited the UK on a number of occasions. We did not interview any people associated with this group, or with the Jamaat-e-Ulama Islam Bangladesh affiliates.

are officially independent but are generally regarded as Jama'at-dominated. These include the Islamic Foundation in Leicester, UK Islamic Mission, Da'watul Islam, Islamic Forum Europe and Markfield College, as well as the East London Mosque. Most British cities with a significant Muslim population have at least one Jama'ati Islami-linked mosque. Jama'ati Islami-linked Bangladeshi Muslims have been active in Labour politics in Tower Hamlets, and the principal Muslim umbrella organisation in the UK, the Muslim Council of Britain, has also been described as being dominated by the Jama'ati Islami.

The success of the War of Liberation in Bangladesh left the Jama'ati Islami membership in a difficult position, and while the party retained an underground existence in Bangladesh until the shift in political circumstances in the late 1970s allowed it to revive, a number of Jama'ati leaders went into exile in the UK and USA. The party retains some membership in the older generation of Bangladeshis in the UK, but has had less appeal to British-born Bangladeshis, while the various Jama'ati affiliates have tended, as in Bangladesh, to adopt more moderate social and political views, at least in public. Seán McLoughlin has recently pointed to moves by some younger Islamic Foundation activists towards a pragmatic acceptance of multiculturalism, while noting that this development remains 'contested and incomplete'.¹⁰

The Hizbut Tahrir was founded by a Palestinian Islamic scholar, Taqiuddin al-Nabhani (1909-77) in Jerusalem in 1953, and spread to the UK in the late 1980s under the leadership of the radical Syrian preacher Omar Bakri Muhammad. Along with its breakaway group, Al-Muhajiroun, Hizut Tahrir gained considerable notoriety in the UK in the late 1990s and for some years after, in part because of its real or perceived links to extremist groups and Omar Bakri Muhammad's high media profile. Hizbut Tahrir had considerable impact at this time among British Muslim students, including some Bangladeshis. The significance of these groups seems to have subsided in recent years, and we did not encounter anyone who was a current member of Hizbut Tahrir.

The Jama'ati Islami and similar politically oriented groups probably gained much of their support from the general sense among British Muslims of hostility ('Islamophobia') from the wider British community, resulting from the Salman Rushdie affair, the 7/7 attacks, and the tendency of much of the British Press to exploit anti-Muslim sentiment at any opportunity. It seems at present though that this phase of Islam in the UK is coming to an end, with the Muslim Council of Britain and other major Islamic organizations shifting towards acceptance of a pluralist cultural context, and a generation of young people, Muslim and non-Muslim, less interested in the oppositions and conflicts of the previous decades.

Hijaz Community

The Hijaz Community is a Sufi community centred on Hijaz College, near Nuneaton, (Birmingham, UK). Hijaz College is a relatively well-known institution, in particular for the presence on its grounds of the tomb and shrine of its founder, the Pakistani

¹⁰ Seán McLoughlin, 2005. 'The State, "New" Muslim Leaderships and Islam as a "Resource" for Public Engagement in Britain.' In *European Muslims and the Secular State*, edited by Jocelyne Cesari and Seán McLoughlin, p.66. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Sufi teacher Shaykh Abdul Wahab Siddiqi (1942-1994).¹¹ This is the first and as far as we know still the only Sufi shrine of this kind in Western Europe, and is already of interest as recreating the most common institution of Sufi religiosity throughout Muslim Asia and North Africa, the autonomous religious establishment centred around the tomb of a deceased Sufi saint. Hijaz College is however by no means simply a replication of traditional Sufi religious practice. Abdul Wahab Siddiqi was a modernist in many respects, who sought to find new forms of Islamic activity appropriate to the modern world. His four sons, who all received a Western education (three in law, one in medicine), as well as being trained in traditional Islamic knowledge, have continued his mission.

The College is only one of a number of organisations that Abdul Wahab Siddiqi created in pursuit of this aim. These also include the Hijazi branch of the Naqshbandi Sufi Order, now headed, as is Hijaz College, by his eldest son, Shaykh Faiz-ul-Aqtab Siddiqi (b. 1967). The Hijaz Community consists of followers of this Sufi tradition. Shaykh Faiz-ul-Aqtab Siddiqi, “Hazrat Sahib” as he is referred to within the community, is a highly articulate and active man, who projects his work as building civic, social and corporate responsibility as well as spiritual values among the Muslim community.

The College campus in Nuneaton functions as a spiritual centre for the Shaykh’s followers, many of whom have adopted seemingly conservative and restrictive modes of Islamic practice; it is common, for example, though by no means required, for the women in the community to wear the full *burqa*, complete with *nikab* or face covering. In other respects, however, Hijaz presents a distinctly modern appearance. Like South Asian Sufi shrines, Hijaz holds an annual *urs* or celebration of the death of the founding Shaykh (cf e.g. Sobhan 1960: 108). The *urs* at Hijaz has however been renamed the ‘Blessed Summit,’ and the programme resembles a New Age spiritual gathering or an academic conference as much as a traditional South Asian *urs*, with a sequence of formal talks by various spiritual leaders of the community interspersed by prayer meetings. The new Hijaz web-site (<http://www.hijazcom.co.uk/>) presents the Hijaz path in terms that are explicitly open to non-Muslims and aligned with the corporate jargon of the early 21st century:

Hijaz Community welcomes everyone from society irrespective of religion, nationality, gender, age, social class, educational background or profession. We believe in creating a community that is ready to help develop, nurture and guide everyone within it. The aim of Hijaz Community is to ensure that every member makes a definitive improvement in their life and is ready to share that value with others around them. It is only through the quality of the individual that one can ensure a truly enriched community. Hijaz Community is founded on the universal principles emanating from Islam. One of these principles is that Muslims and Non-Muslims are invited to embark on a path to rejuvenate their mutual destinies. Non-Muslims are welcomed as guest members to seek a true meaning to their life, rather than simply conforming to a set ideology. Members who follow Islam are encouraged to question the basis of their adherence to its fundamental principles and ensure that their affirmation of faith stems from a process of reasoning rather than a process of pure narrative. [. . .] The outcome which Hijaz Community

¹¹ This is a Naqshbandi *tariqa* deriving from the Naqshbandi-Mujaddadi order of Shaykh Ahmad Faruqi (c.1563-1625) and his followers.

envisages is one where the local community tends to its own needs, in balance with the needs of everyone and everything around it.

For the young people we have been meeting from the Community, who are quite close to the Shaykh, membership in the Community involves much more than a mode of dress, but is an all-encompassing commitment that increasingly takes over from any previous life goals or directions. Their spiritual practices include not only the five obligatory prayers, but extra meditation and *zikr* as prescribed by the Shaykh, extensive work mentoring new or junior members of the organisation, teaching at Hijaz College, administrative and community tasks and the like. These people are self-consciously involved in a form of disciplining their body, soul, and spirit towards the one goal of perfect love for Allah.

Islamic Circles, City Circle and 'Non-Aligned' Muslims

Islamic Circles and City Circle are two further Muslim organizations in the UK that represents quite different approaches to the issues faced by young Muslims in the UK to the organizations described above. The Islamic Circles network was started in 2001 by two young British-born Bangladeshis, one from Sylheti background, the other from Dhaka. The network coordinates a variety of events, including a wide range of talks and social events on Islamic topics, martial-arts self-defence training for Muslim women (the 'Ninjabi' programme), and also regular 'marriage events,' occasions for Muslims seeking marriage partners to meet together and get to know each other. Islamic Circles set up its matrimonial service in 2003 and they currently arrange at least three or four themed matrimonial events each month in London. These include, for example, events for Over 35s, for Muslim doctors or for Muslims in the west of London. Other events have been ethnically oriented, being designed for example for Gujaratis, Pakistanis, Arabs or Bangladeshis. The model has been replicated with the encouragement of Islamic Circles by Muslim community organisations elsewhere in the UK.

The whole question of young people meeting prospective spouses at a public event is a sensitive one within the community, and Islamic Circles defend their approach by arguing that the Islamic ban on *khalwah*, a term generally interpreted as referring to the meeting together of young people before marriage, is based on a misunderstanding. They argue that *khalwah* really refers to 'seclusion,' where unmarried men and women meet together in private and so may be at risk of illicit sexual relations, rather than 'free mixing' in a social context. The existence of the organization and the evident demand for its events points however to the problems faced by young Muslims in the UK who are looking for appropriate marriage partners, and more generally to the tension and difficulty surrounding the area of marriage, a theme to which we will return later in this report.

City Circle is a organization run by young Muslim professionals in London. While not primarily a Bangladeshi organization, its regular discussion meetings are attended by many young Bangladeshis. City Circle also runs a number of community projects.

We met a number of young Bangladeshi Muslims at and through Islamic Circles and City Circle gatherings. They represented, for the most part, young people who were committed to identification as Muslims and were often personally quite serious about their Islamic practice, but preferred to stay away from membership in organizations such as the various Jama'ati Islami affiliates, Tablighi Jama'at or Hijaz. These people

rarely saw any conflict between Islam and modernity, and were often insistent on the appropriateness and compatibility of Islam and modernity. This is again a theme to which we will return later in the report.

5. Contemporary Islam: Modernist, Islamist, neo-Fundamentalist?

As the above account indicates, many new interpretations and approaches have developed within Islam in recent years. They include the well-known international Islamic revival movement of the Tablighi Jama'at, with its huge annual gathering (Biswa Ijtema) at Tongi, and other movements with similar aims but different approaches such as the Minhaj-ul Qur'an, originating from Pakistan. There are political movements such as the Jama'ati Islami and Hizbut Tahrir and their various offshoots, aiming, at least in their initial forms, at reconstructing society according to Islamic principles. There are movements founded by various Sufi teachers, such as the late Abdul Latif Chowdhury from Fultali, well-known among Sylheti Bangladeshis, or the contemporary Sheikh of Pakistani origin, Pir Faiz-ul-Aqtab Siddiqi, some of whose Bangladeshi followers we got to know in England. Then there are many smaller groups scattered throughout Muslim communities, often organizing regular meetings for Islamic instruction (*talim*) or Qur'anic explanation (*tafsir*).

These groups are often very different in their detailed understanding of Islam, in how they read the Qur'an and *hadith* and in what they believe that they imply for the world today. What they almost all have in common, though, is that they are critical in greater or lesser degree of the Islamic observance of the older generations in countries like Bangladesh. They all provide an understanding of Islam that rejects some or all of 'traditional' Islamic observance, and is intended for the present day.

Questions of Terminology

Exactly how one should refer to these movements is somewhat problematic, and while we have opted for the generic term 'modernist' we are aware that this usage will not please everyone. In part this is because 'modernism' is often used in the Islamic context in a more restricted sense, to refer to the Western-influenced reform movements in countries such as Turkey, Iran and Egypt in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

To use 'modernist' in such a restricted sense causes problems, however, in relation to later Islamic movements, many of which distance themselves much more explicitly from Western secular values than the classic Islamic modernist movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Terms such as Islamist and fundamentalist are commonly employed, but are also problematic, variously used, and seen as inappropriate by many contemporary Muslims.

One of the more systematic attempts to provide a vocabulary in this area is that of the French scholar Olivier Roy, who distinguishes in his recent book *Globalised Islam* between 'Islamist' organisations (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood) whose primary orientation is towards the establishment of an Islamic state and Islamic law, and 'Neofundamentalist' organisations (e.g. the Taliban), whose primary orientation is towards the moral and personal transformation of the behaviour of individual Muslims.

Within this terminology, organisations such as the Jama'at-i Islami or Hizbut Tahrir would be 'Islamist,' while groups such as the Tabligh-i Jama'at or Hijaz Community would be 'neofundamentalist'. Both Islamist and Neofundamentalist types of organisation are opposed to 'traditional' forms of South Asian Islam, which are mostly tolerant, syncretistic, and embedded in South Asian social and cultural practices.

Roy's distinctions are helpful to some degree, but tend to elide other significant distinctions. The Taliban and the Hijaz community are in reality very different organisations operating in very different social and political contexts, while the Tabligh-i Jama'at, for all of its vast international reach, operates quite differently in different countries, as the growth of scholarship on local versions of the movement is increasingly showing. Similarly, while the Jama'at-i Islami organisations in Pakistan and Bangladesh remain political parties with an explicit orientation towards the Islamisation of society as a whole, Jama'at-i Islami affiliates in the UK have moved significantly away from such positions towards more positive modes of engagement with British society such as the Markfield Institute's chaplaincy programme.

We feel that the usage 'modernist,' for all of its problems, does at least make it clear that we are talking in all these cases about contemporary movements responding to contemporary problems.

Why are Young British Bangladeshis Attracted to Modernist Islam?

The campaign against Salman Rushdie, the 9/11 attacks in the USA, the 7/7 attacks in London and associated media coverage have led much of the non-Muslim British public to associate Islam with terrorism and repression, creating a climate of 'Islamophobia' and hostility to Islam among the general population. Contemporary international politics has also been dominated in recent years by the conflict between the major Western powers and the Islamic world, focusing on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the confrontation over Iran's nuclear weapons programme, and the continuing crisis in Israel/Palestine. These wider political issues are one of the main reasons why many young people from Muslim backgrounds, in Bangladesh and elsewhere, have been attracted in recent years to become more involved with Islam. If Islam internationally is under attack, then idealistic young Muslims are easily encouraged to take the side of Islam against that of the Western attackers.

International politics may well explain why young people become more committed to Islam, but we felt that there are other reasons why many young people today become involved in new kinds of Islamic observance or Islamic social activity.

For Bangladeshis in the past, particularly in rural areas, the patterns of everyday life were largely created by the conservative moral structures of village society, including the authority of older village men from powerful families over women, young people and poorer families. These patterns of life were justified in terms of Islamic values, and imposed by village *salish* courts and the like. This kind of Islam, based in the extended family and its moral structure, was brought by the first generation migrants from Sylhet and similar rural areas to the UK, and it still forms the moral structure of life for this older generation.

Young Bangladeshis in Western countries such as the United Kingdom however live in a world far distant from the rural Bangladesh to which their parents' values hark back. Instead, they are living in a plural world with many different cultural, religious

and non-religious ways of being. Their parents, who have often worked very hard to establish their families in the West, are attached to values that seem conservative, old-fashioned and irrelevant. Adopting the values of the wider British society is one alternative, but it can be a problematic one. Particularly in the socially disadvantaged and depressed working-class areas of British cities where many young Bangladeshis live, British society can seem alien, unfriendly, and unappealing. In circumstances like these, new versions of Islam can offer an attractive and meaningful pattern for living one's life, and their spiritual values and practices can provide a purpose and direction lacking from the surrounding secular society.

We feel that this background helps to explain why many young people are becoming involved in Islamic observance. These new ways of being Islamic provide them with an understanding of life that makes sense in the world of today, and that is different both from the Western youth culture of parties, music, alcohol and drugs and the traditional Bangladeshi Islam of their parents.

We should note here that we are in no way intended to dismiss the spiritual values behind these organizations, and it was very clear that these were taken seriously by the young people we met, and were becoming an important part of their lives. As social scientists, however, our focus is more on the way in which those values and orientations might make sense in terms of the wider texture of their lives. In fact, many of our interviewees, both members and non-members of Islamic organizations, were explicit about the way in which Islam provided a structure and pattern for living. To analyse it in this way, we feel, is one valid approach to understanding the meaning and significance of Islam in people's lives. It is not the only approach, nor does it exhaust the ways in which Islam can be understood, but it provides insight and understanding into important aspects of the appeal of modernist Islam.

It is this general approach to contemporary Islamic movements that led to the overall approach of our project, with its emphasis on everyday life, personal relationships, marriage and the family. We felt that it was particularly worth looking at the ways in which these new versions of Islam might offer solutions to the problems faced by young people in relation to their personal lives. How do they help them to understand the meaning of love, romance and marriage? Do they assist them in finding suitable marriage partners and setting up a family in today's rapidly changing world? These were basic themes of our project, and in the following pages we describe some of what we found.

Gender Issues among British Bangladeshis

Before moving to present some of our findings in more detail, it is worth looking at one key area, that of gender relations. This is a sensitive and complex area, in part because of the central role that the treatment of women has had within negative Western views of Islam and of Muslim societies. The connection between hostility to Islam and accusations of the subordination of women has become close, with issues such as veiling and forced marriage particularly salient.

This has led to a considerable and understandable defensiveness among Muslims in the UK, as elsewhere, regarding the position of women within their communities. Where Muslim communities and individual Muslims have responded to these criticisms, they have tended to do so by drawing a distinction between real or genuine Islam and the cultural practices of particular Muslim societies, such as Bangladesh.

This distinction has its problems, since defining real or genuine Islam is not so straightforward, but it at least allows space for an internal critique to be developed within Muslim communities of the real problems faced by women in many of these communities. In fact, many of the problems are widespread among non-Muslim South Asian communities in the UK (Hindu or Sikh) as well as among Muslims from various parts of the Indian subcontinent.

Being able to argue that the subordination and oppression of women is un-Islamic is quite significant for many of the young people we encountered, since they have to mediate in their own lives the relatively egalitarian values of the wider British community with attitudes and behaviour within their own community which are still far from equal in terms of gender issues.

The problems are of course most acute for women themselves, and centre around a number of major issues.

- ***Marriage choices.*** Here the problem is not so much the ‘forced’ marriage of Western media stereotypes, although these do occur, as the pressure to accept a parental choice, often a relative from Bangladesh, for the sake of the family. As we will see, commitment to Islamic observance can be a way to avoid such marriages.
- ***Work.*** Young Bangladeshi women in the UK are probably somewhat less committed to the idea of an independent career than young women in the wider UK community, and more prepared to see motherhood as a primary role and career. However, many of them have independent careers, and do not necessarily want to renounce them. We found considerable concern about whether husbands or in-laws will allow women to continue working after marriage. This is probably intensified by the relative success of young Bangladeshi women in the labour market as compared to their male counterparts. Our impression was that the concern was more with being able to work in relation to maintaining personal autonomy than with the financial aspects.
- ***Domestic violence.*** Few people spoke about this directly, and we did not probe explicitly in this area. However, we know from other research that there are fairly high levels of domestic violence in the Bangladeshi community, as in other South Asian communities in the UK, and the traditional Bangladeshi attitudes that condone male violence to women are still present among much of the elder generation. The frequent concern with finding a husband who, as a good Muslim, would be gentle, considerate, and treat his wife properly, probably reflects young women’s awareness that this will not necessarily be the case.
- ***Divorce.*** While UK divorce rates have been falling in recent years, and are somewhat lower for Muslims than for the general population, they are still high enough for divorce to be an area of major concern, and there are substantial numbers of divorced Bangladeshi women in the community, often with young children. Concerns about divorce also underlie some of the desire for an ‘Islamic marriage,’ since a husband who is a good Muslim is a better bet for a stable marriage.
- ***Polygamy.*** Polygamy came up in a number of interviews and focus groups and is clearly also an area of concern. While polygamy is illegal in the UK and in

general disapproved of by educated urban Bangladeshis, it is not uncommon among the elder generation for *de facto* polygamous marriages to take place. In theory, young women can ask for the marriage contract to include a provision that if their husband marries again, the first marriage is rendered null and void, but in practice marriage contracts are arranged by parents and other senior relatives, and few young women feel able to insist on such a provision being included. While it is of course allowable under Islamic law for men to marry more than one wife, here again the expectation is that a good Muslim would be less likely to enter into such a relationship.

We do not want to suggest that the lives of young Bangladeshi women in the UK are dominated by these issues, or that relations with family are necessarily full of conflict. Also, not all individuals or families are the same. The kind of relationship a girl has with her parents and siblings, and the extent to which they might provide support if things go wrong with the girl's marriage, could make a lot of difference.

While we have presented these issues from a female viewpoint, and they obviously impact more directly on women, men also have concerns in a number of these areas. Looking for a wife who is a good Muslim can also be a way of seeking a reliable, stable and compatible partner, and resisting pressure to accept someone preferred by senior family members.

An issue for the parental generation, but also for young people of both sexes, is the fear that young people brought up in the UK may have been 'corrupted' by their exposure to Western values. Amrit Wilson has spoken¹² of the pressure on young South Asians, including women, to join the culture of 'pubbing and clubbing,' as our interviewees referred to it, and certainly many of the young people we met had gone through periods of heavy involvement in drinking, smoking and secular modes of socializing before turning to Islam. While all this can be a reason to prefer a supposedly 'unspoilt' marital partner from back in Bangladesh, that also raised the risk, for both women and men, but especially women, of radical incompatibility in values and attitudes. The tendency for men (and their parents) to prefer wives brought up in Bangladesh also made it harder for Bangladeshi girls brought up in the UK to find suitable British Bangladeshi husbands.

Why are Young Bangladeshis in Bangladesh Attracted to Modernist Islam?

How far does this kind of argument apply in Bangladesh? And if so to whom? As our brief descriptions of Islam in the UK and Bangladesh suggest, there are real differences between the two societies. In urban Bangladesh, Islam is the background of everyday life, rather than the marker of a distinctive identity. Levels of Islamic observance vary, and for members of the urban middle and upper classes it can be relatively nominal. Young Bangladeshis in Bangladesh are however also caught in a clash of values. It is constituted less by a direct confrontation between 'Islam' and 'the West,' and more by the ongoing tensions of the breakdown of the extended family and its moral framework.

Dhaka's population half a century ago was less than a million; today it is over 15 million. A very high proportion of Dhaka's citizens today, in other words, came from a rural background, often quite recently, either as a result of rural impoverishment or

¹² In *Dreams, Questions, Struggles: South Asian Women in Britain* (Pluto Press, 2006).

simply in search of a better life. Even families that have been in Dhaka for several generations may retain strong links back to a village of origin, and patterns of inherited obligation to a wider family in that village.

The pressure of a modern economy however is always towards the individual or the nuclear family as an economic unit, and this creates an ongoing tension, particularly when there is a large difference in income and material success between extended family members, between obligations to the immediate nuclear family and obligations to the extended family (*paribar*). The moral basis of village society is increasingly a burden, and its obligations in contradiction with what is necessary to survive and succeed in the urban environment. This is not of course only the story of people in Dhaka, but in large cities all over South Asia and much of the rest of the developing world.

Many of the specific issues in the area of gender relations also have relevance in Bangladesh. Young educated urban women in Bangladesh may not have been exposed to the relatively egalitarian social climate of the contemporary UK, but they too are concerned about the stability of their marriage, and about being treated well and considerately by their husbands. The question of whether women would continue to work after marriage also arose in several of our interviews. Issues to do with identity politics were also significant for many of our interviewees, with the real or perceived levels of hostility to Islam on behalf of the Western powers motivating young people to respond in terms of personal commitment to their Islamic identity and to an Islamic way of life.

In the following sections we examine some of our data in more detail, taking a number of specific topics in turn. We start with the question of the adoption of Islamic piety by young people in relation to their parents.

6. Islamic Piety and the Family: From ‘Traditional’ to ‘Pure’ Islam

In this section, we look at the way in which new forms of Islam have entered into the relationship between young Muslims and their parents, both in Bangladesh and the UK.

Young Muslims’ exposure to these new forms of Islam, in both Bangladesh and the UK, takes place not only through participation in groups and organizations, but through circulation of sermons through cassettes, videos, DVDs, and more recently through thousands of internet sites and TV documentaries. Knowledge of Islam is no longer just the domain of Islamic scholars, as increased literacy and the use of various new media now make it possible for ordinary Muslims to familiarise themselves with the scriptures and develop religious reasoning in ways which were not previously possible. The emphasis in all these Islamic training and the ever flourishing Islamic learning circles in Bangladesh, the UK and elsewhere is to purify oneself and others around, and to strive towards total submission to what is now considered ‘true’ Islam and thereby to Allah.

What was notable among many of our young Bangladeshi interviewees was their firm commitment to ‘submission’ in their day to day lives. In this commitment they need to discipline themselves, a discipline not necessarily imposed by others, but by themselves as they struggle (the ‘greater jihad’) to create a distance from all the immoralities in their midst. Typically, such commitment and such self-distancing

from what they perceive as impurity and immorality brings young Islamic purists into conflict with families and the surrounding communities. For young Bangladeshis in both Bangladesh and the UK, particularly for young women, the family is a major structuring factor in their lives. The shaping of self and identity almost inevitably involves real or potential conflict with the family, particularly in relation to marital choices. Such situations of conflict are therefore particularly illuminating in understanding how these young people understand their lives and seek to shape their futures. Beyond the family, though, lies a wider background of possible influences, including the international culture of modernity with which these young people are familiar and in which most of them actively participate; and the background of British or Bangladeshi society, with its opportunities or lack of opportunity for employment, education, or (above all) marriage.

Traditionally, Bangladeshi society (and the society of East Pakistan and East Bengal before it) has always been patriarchal. This patriarchal domination was successfully maintained through the gender norms of *parda* (the practice of female seclusion), honour and shame. These values are often associated with Islam, but in practice were adhered to by women of both Islamic and non-Islamic backgrounds in Bangladesh. In fact, these values were prevalent norms across much of the Mediterranean and Middle East, among both Muslim and non-Muslim women. Rozario has argued elsewhere, particularly in her book *Purity and Communal Boundaries*, that in Bangladesh the term *parda* (literally meaning curtain) in the strictest sense involved keeping women confined within the home and covering them in veils whenever they ventured out of the home. However *parda* was used more generally in Bangladesh to refer to women's modesty and to the prevailing restrictions on their interacting with males outside the specified categories with whom contact is permitted.

Standard features of the Bangladeshi family therefore involved the control of women's behaviour, particularly their interaction with men, by their male guardians (fathers for unmarried women, husbands for married women, brothers or sons for widows), a control that was justified by the ideology of *parda*, honour and shame. An important part of this control was the necessity for families to arrange marriages for their daughters as early as was practicable, since unmarried adult women posed a particular risk to the maintenance of the family's honour. The limits for socially acceptable behaviour for women became considerably extended since the 1980s, when Rozario undertook her initial studies of Bangladeshi village society, particularly through the public sphere and paid employment having become much more open to women. However, the basic principles of the patriarchal family and of its authority over women in particular remained unchanged, and were also largely transferred to the UK by the first generation of British Bangladeshis.

At the same time, 'traditional' families in Bangladesh, particularly in the cities, were not necessarily committed to high levels of Islamic observance. The physical wearing of the veil or head-covering by Muslim women was still relatively uncommon in both cities and countryside in the 1980s, and while a degree of Islamic conformity, including men's attendance at the Friday congregational prayers (*jumma namaz*) and the observance of the major Islamic calendrical festivals, was widely observed, people did not necessarily pray five times a day, fast throughout Ramadan, or regard undertaking the Hajj as a major necessity. Bangladeshi Islam, as in most parts of the Islamic world before the Wahhabi reform movements of the 18th century and their gradual spread outwards from Saudi Arabia, was also suffused with Sufi practices and ideas regarding shrines (*mazar*), holy men (*pir*), and access to spiritual power via such

intermediaries, as well as popular ritual practices on occasions such as childbirth and weddings that the Wahhabi-influenced movements regarded as thoroughly un-Islamic.

As we have seen, the various new Islamic movements differ in their attitudes to such practices. However, even those that accept some of the Sufi practices, such as the Hijaz Community, tend to be generally highly critical of how they were performed in the past, and of the level of traditional Bangladeshi and South Asian religious observance in general. This contemporary critique of religious observance in the parental generation is an important background to young people's attitudes to Islam both in the UK and in Bangladesh.

Islam and the Family among Young British Bangladeshis

In the UK, this is intensified by the association of the Islam of the parental generation with a Bangladeshi cultural background that young people generally found alien and unwelcome. 'Culture' often acted as shorthand for these unwanted elements, as in the following comment from a young British Bangladeshi woman:

I hate Pakistani culture, I hate Bangladeshi culture, I think people are very restricted by it and their families restrict them a lot. [. . .] I wouldn't say that I'm anti-Bangla, it's just the negative aspects, the crudeness or harshness or ignorance at times. Like the way Bengali families can culturalise their Islam and then end up not educating their daughters about the Qur'an and Hadith but send their boys to the mosque. And weird ideas that people tend to have about women not needing to be educated because they will only stay at home anyway. I find it quite appalling that it still goes on in this day and age.

Thus it was very common to find among the young people we studied a strong commitment to Islam combined with a rejection of the 'traditional' Bangladeshi forms of Islamic observance practiced by their own parents.

We gradually realised that this rejection of their family's religious practices was not just a by-product of these young people's involvement in new forms of Islam. In many ways, it was one of the most central issues. Rather than rejecting their parents' religion because they were learning new forms of Islam, it often seemed that they were adopting new forms of Islam as a way of justifying a move away from parental control over their lives. It was this feeling that led us to look more closely at the ways in which these new forms of Islamic piety could be seen as something that was opposed to the traditional Bangladeshi family, and even as something that could be taken on in part as a way in which young women might resist their parents' authority.

Certainly, the distinction young Muslims draw between their parents' culture, and Islam is very common. To the young people we met, it was more or less a matter of course that their parents' religion and culture was flawed and not properly Islamic. Many young people spoke of their parents being lax in their practices. Their fathers might attend the Friday *jumma namaz*, but that aside, they prayed only on occasion, perhaps more during Ramadan. Their mothers did not usually use the *hijab*, although some of them started using it after having gone to Hajj or after being influenced by their daughters. While most of these young people had received some Islamic education as children, either at a local mosque or through a teacher at home, and might have learned to read the Qur'an to some degree, they almost universally presented the Islamic practice they had learned in childhood as empty and

mechanical, and were highly critical of the understanding of Islam among their parents' generation. They felt that they had only learned the true meaning of Islam and its practices at a much later stage.

They also saw their parents as engaged in all sorts of Bengali 'cultural' rituals that were questionably Islamic, such as the *gae holud* (turmeric ceremony)¹³, other wedding and birthing rituals, healing practices, *pir* cults, music and dance. They were dismissive too of their parents' obsession with status, reputation, class and ethnic divisions. Women in particular were critical of their parents' traditional ideas about gender roles and values. Parents' concerns with status and reputation led them to arrange elaborate and expensive weddings, with heavy expenditure on wedding dresses, gold, *gae holud* feasts and rituals. For young people, all this conspicuous consumption and competitive display was thoroughly un-Islamic.

At the same time, the young people who were bringing this Islamic critique against their parents were also often critical of their own earlier habits of excessive, wasteful and unnecessary consumption. Many of them spoke of having spent years idling away time, drinking, 'pubbing and clubbing,' often in mixed gender groups. All of this they now saw as Western, evil and immoral and forbidden. Thus the young Islamists with their reformed behavioural patterns were not only challenging their parents' culture, values and politics, but also opposing the forms of Western or Western-influenced modernity that they themselves had been indulging in a few years earlier.

Young British Bangladeshis have particular problems, since they have to negotiate their lives within both their parents' Bangladeshi culture and the wider British culture. Many young people clearly find this a difficult and unsatisfactory location. The question of who they are and where they belong becomes especially problematic when the time comes for their marriage. Do they look to marry a British-born Bangladeshi man or a woman, or a non-Bangladeshi man or woman? Or do they defer to their parents' choices which often involve returning to Bangladesh to marry a cousin or another 'good' Bangladeshi man or woman?

Often, then, involvement in an Islamic organization can be a way of avoiding parental marriage choices and finding a reliable partner. The *shaykh* of the Hijaz Community, the Sufi organization we studied in the British Midlands, often helped arrange marriages between members of the community, and it was clear that many young people in the organization expected to get married to another community member, not necessarily from the same ethnic background. Finding a marital partner through an Islamic organization offered the hope of someone who shared your values and ideas and could provide a secure a stable life-partner. It also made it much easier to resist one's parents' choices, since you could fall back on the authority of the *shaykh* or the organization.

For young men, Islam also provided ways of finding newer, less patriarchal and more gender-tolerant forms of male Muslim identity. Again, this is a particular issue for young British Muslims, since Islam is widely portrayed in the UK as hostile to and oppressive of women, and traditional Bangladeshi family structures are patriarchal and often controlling of women. Many of the new religious organizations, such as the

¹³ The *gae holud* is a ceremony that takes place separately in the households of the bride and bridegroom shortly before the marriage. It involves them being smeared with turmeric paste and fed sweet rice, and was a key part of a traditional Bengali marriages in many areas across all religious communities.

Hijaz Community and the Tablighi Jama'at, taught that men should acquire a gentler, less aggressive personality, and emphasized the caring and compassionate nature of the Prophet Muhammad as a model.

Another factor here is perhaps the reality of high unemployment and the lack of well-paying, high status jobs for many young British Bangladeshi men. The new Islamic models of masculinity offered an image of a young man as a caring husband and father that provides an opportunity for self-respect in a world where conventional forms of male 'success' are becoming harder to achieve.

Islam against the Family in Bangladesh

Young Bangladeshis in Bangladesh are not faced as directly with a conflict between their parental values and the egalitarian gender attitudes of wider society, but many of the same issues still operate. Young people in the city have much wider opportunities to encounter possible marriage partners than in the past, and as in much of urban South Asia tensions exist between 'love marriage' and 'arranged marriage'. As in the UK, religious organizations can provide an acceptable context for finding a suitable partner. The Jama'ati Islami student organizations in particular seemed to have a well-developed culture of arranging marriages between their members.

Issues to do with male aggression and patriarchal attitudes also surfaced in many of our interviews. Domestic violence of men towards their wives is still common and acceptable in Bangladeshi villages. Educated urban people would not describe such behaviour as appropriate, but patriarchal and authoritarian male attitudes are quite deeply ingrained in Bangladesh, and concerns about them probably underlie comments like this, from a woman we interviewed in Dhaka who belonged, along with her husband, to the Tablighi Jama'at:

Bengali men are hot-tempered, they get angry easily. It's understandable since they work outside in difficult situations, they have to struggle to get through the streets, and struggle in the aggressive atmosphere at the office. The Tablighi helps them to control their aggressive tendencies. What the Tablighi teach is the Sunna, the mode of behaviour of the Prophet. The Prophet was extremely *omayik* (gentle), he never raised his voice towards his wives, everything was done in a very gentle manner.

The situation in relation to women's employment in Bangladesh is also a cause of tension. Educated young women are often keen to be able to continue with their career, and the expansion of women's employment opportunities has made this much more practicable and real than even a couple of decades ago. However, traditional attitudes remain strong. Women going out to work is still often seen as problematic, both because it implies a failure on the part of their husbands to be able to support them from his own resources, and because it provides contexts in which women might mix freely with other men and so constitutes a moral risk. However, if a woman is wearing a *hijab* and working in an appropriately Islamic context, this can make it easier for her to be allowed by her husband or in-laws to go on working.

7. Islamic Marriage: Haven in an Uncertain World

Thus we suggest that one of the main attractions of modernist versions of Islam is their ability to offer solutions to the problems faced by contemporary Muslim families in a rapidly changing world. In particular, they provide a model of personal identity

that refocuses the individual's life around a vision of marriage, family and community. Marriage and family are areas where new Islamic movements have a particularly strong appeal, presenting a vision of society built around a proper, Divinely-ordained relationship between man and woman, in which children can be given a sound and spiritually healthy upbringing. This vision provides a positive alternative both to older versions of Islam, which are seen by these movements as compromised through their involvement with pre-modern, 'non-Islamic' customs and practices, and to the perceived moral and religious inadequacy of Western societies.

In this section we focus on a further issue that came up repeatedly in our interviews with young Bangladeshis on the subject of marriage, both in Bangladesh and in the UK. This was the question of *security* as an important reason for looking for a genuine Islamic marriage with a life-partner who shared one's Islamic values. But why did these young Muslims feel insecure, and why did they feel that Islam could give them security? Here the complexity of modern life, especially in the urban environment, is a significant factor. Men and women, particularly if they are living in the city and are both working, may be spending much of the time apart, and they are also often living in a single-family household, without the support and security provided by the surrounding members of the extended family.

Security Issues in Bangladesh

Women's anxiety about marriage in Bangladesh, and the attraction of Islam as a solution, need to be understood in relation to the way in which marriage and families operated in Bangladesh traditionally and at present. For Bangladeshis, for young women in particular, family has always been a major structuring factor in their lives. It is part of the control of women's behaviour, particularly their interaction with men, by their male guardians (fathers for unmarried women, husbands for married women, brothers or sons for widows). This control was justified by the ideology of *parda*, honour and shame. An important part of this control was the necessity for families to arrange marriages for their daughters as early as was practicable, since unmarried adult women posed a particular risk to the maintenance of the family's honour.

The limits for socially acceptable behaviour for women, particularly educated urban women, have become considerably extended in recent years, in particular through the public sphere and paid employment having become much more open to women. The basic principles of the patriarchal family and of its authority over women in particular have however remained unchanged. Within this context, while urban educated women may very well enjoy a certain amount of autonomy in terms of their physical mobility, when time comes for marriage, they are still subjected to norms and values not all that different from their sisters in the rural areas. Thus, while for women the pressure to get married at a certain age remains, they are also now concerned about finding a dependable, secure husband within the chaotic, uncertain modern world within which they are now living.

One Tablighi woman we interviewed said,

I think it makes me feel confident knowing that my husband is going to control his gaze by lowering his eyes when he sees other women. These days men and women are working together everywhere. Extra-marital affairs become so common. I have several friends who are not very religious, they suffer from a constant anxiety about their husbands, in case they get involved in some 'affair' with other girls. So far, I feel completely

secure that my husband will not look at any other girls. He also feels the same if I go somewhere.

Similarly, men too want to find a woman whose purity can be beyond all doubt, and who after marriage will remain pure and chaste. Many of our young interviewees described how they had begun to feel uncomfortable about the kinds of life-style they had been leading. They had been wasting too much time idling away with other young people, often in mixed groups. Some had also been involved in alcohol and drugs, some had had problems with boyfriends or girlfriends, or had friends who had these problems. They saw families in disarray, leading to chaos and eventual breakdown, because there was no 'structure' in their lives for husbands and wives to behave within. They saw young people destroying their lives.

Concerns about Western-style promiscuity, premarital and extramarital sex were also widespread. One of our interviewees in Bangladesh, an unmarried Tablighi Jama'at man, spoke at length about the pitfalls of having pre-marital love affairs. He claimed to know of at least four girls at one of the Dhaka universities who had committed suicide after such relationships went sour. Another Tabligh-i Jama'at man told us of a family where the father would come home late after having spent time with another woman. One day, he came home and saw a man dropping his wife home in his posh car. Meanwhile, their young son lay on the floor, having overdosed himself with heroin. Whether these stories are real or not, they reveal how our young interviewees saw or imagined the life that they had rejected in turning to Islam.

The idea of 'structure' came up a lot with our interviewees. They often saw their life before they became seriously involved with Islam as chaotic and lacking in structure: they were *chonnochara* (directionless), wasting their time on music or *adda* (socializing and talking). Islam by contrast provided a 'structure' or 'format' within which a good Muslim should lead his life. If one operated within that format, which was essentially given by Islam, in the Qur'an and the Hadith, in other words through the example of Prophet Mohammad's life, then one should not have any real problems within marriage. They regularly pointed out that Islam is a complete way of life. It provides rules and regulations for every aspect of people's lives. Islam is not only about prayers and other rituals, but about relationships within marriage, how to treat each other within marriage, who will be the leader and why there is a need for a leader within a marital home, how to deal with the children, and how to deal with the wider community.

Security Issues for Young British Bangladeshis

The question of whether a marital partner could be relied upon to behave responsibly was also a worry in the UK, where the prevalence and attractiveness of sexually permissive Western life styles means that both young men and young women may be suspicious and doubtful about whether a possible marriage partner can be relied upon. Young people had often had gone through a period of 'pubbing and clubbing,' adopting a secular lifestyle, which had proved unsatisfactory. An arranged marriage with limited knowledge of their prospective partner could be a risky undertaking, particularly if their parents' choice was motivated as much by family politics and the need to facilitate the migration of relatives from Bangladesh as by the needs of their own child. Insisting on a practising Muslim partner was one way of increasing the chances of a reliable partner.

In situations such as the Hijaz community, young people could also hope for someone who shared their personal values and commitments, and a life together as part of a supportive community under the spiritual guidance of the Shaykh. Here the husband of a recently-married British Bangladeshi couple explains how their shared values, derived from the community to which they both belonged, would help their marriage:

Ideally I think both of us would like to develop ourselves in our marriage on something which reflects the marriage of the Prophet with his wife, and this means to me that we slowly nurture a structure which is based upon that which the Prophet did. The two of us, and the community that we are part of, we follow the same form of Islamic governance, personal governance, you know; we can have that relationship based on the framework of Islam because everyone who's part of that, to a greater or lesser degree, follows the same morals and ethical principles and conscience.

The same man spoke of how he saw love in marriage:

My definition of love is to want to be like the object of your love, to think about them all the time, to talk about them with everyone, ... these are all very deep, very powerful emotions, and, you know, manifest in very powerful actions but you couldn't have that in a husband and wife relationship unless the other person was having that divine love for God. Patience, tolerance, servitude, selflessness, these can only exist if at least one of the people have that relationship with God because the energy to sustain that. The energy to sustain that comes from Him, and that relationship, it won't come from the other person.

He and his wife, along with some fellow-members of the community, were all critical of the patterns of love-affair which they viewed as Western, or as "Bollywood or Hollywood" type behaviour: "Oh, I love that person so much, and then, a few months later, I fell out of love with him or her". Such love is both anti-Islamic and temporary. They had all experienced this kind of relationship, but now they were part of a spiritual, supportive community guided by a charismatic Sheikh, and were all on a journey towards perfection, to be close to the Creator, to be beloved of the Creator like the Prophet.

Another young British Bangladeshi woman spoke about why she was carefully following Islamic rules of mutual avoidance with her future husband, although they were to be married in two months:

Because, you know, it can just as well not work out. I could, you know... few days later you might hear, you know, that, oh, it's not going to go ahead for whatever reason. Only Allah knows how it will all work out. So that's why... that's for your own protection. You know if you build a bond with someone and it breaks, it's going to hurt and it's not going to be good for the heart. Many people think Islam is very rigid and no fun but there's so much wisdom behind the rulings and guidance. [. . .] For example, the concept of boyfriend and girlfriend just doesn't exist in Islam. You just have to look around and you can see, you know, why... the wisdom behind it, you know. Personally, I can see the wisdom behind it. If you have a bad relationship it affects you in your future relationships. I know many, sort of, men and women, you know, they end up hating men or women, or not trusting them because they had a bad experience before. Or some men or women they take advantage of their partner and when they get tired of them they just drop them. It's for protection against these

kind of things. And also against diseases and children who don't know who their parents are, and that kind of thing, and to protect the family unit as well. So that's why I can see the wisdom behind it.

She described how the most important thing about her future husband for her was his 'Islamic character':

Like, you know, he's into Islam and he tries to emulate the prophet and the characteristics of the prophet. I mean, Prophet Muhammad had perfect good character, the way he treated his wives, he never shouted at them, he never abused them or hit them, or even neglected them, you know, he would always make time for them as well, as he was very loving and funny, you know, with his wives as well. I think, unfortunately there's a lot of that's missing from many marriages today, in Bangladeshi marriages. I just admire anyone who tries to emulate the Prophet, I really love that.

She too was unimpressed by Western ideas of love:

In the terms of the Western concept of what is love, I mean the version I get is, you know, like the movie style, you know, that just does not exist. I don't believe in this, oh, there's a perfect soul mate, that one person. I don't believe that; I think that's rubbish, personally. I think there's so many people, there has to be more than one for you. ... I think people get lust and love mixed up a lot. I think that kind of love, that lust-love, you cannot maintain that all the time; that's just impossible.

Love is important, definitely. I know many people argue what, you know, there is still really no definition of what love is; but to me it means mercy and kindness, and in the Quran it encourages you to be merciful and kind to each other. For me that's what love is... Interestingly, the Quran actually addresses the men more, in terms of, to be kind and merciful to their wives, especially kind. That's their right, the women's right over their husband is that they be kind to them, and it's mentioned quite a few times in the Quran, and also in the Hadith. Prophet Mohammed even gave advice about sex as well, you know, like, he emphasised the importance of foreplay, interestingly.

Thus even though Islam tells women to obey their husbands, she said, this is only "as long as a husband doesn't go against Islamic God's law". In other words, if one marries a man who follows Quranic injunctions to be kind and merciful to his wife, the latter will be treated well in every respect within the marriage. So, Islam has provided all the answers this woman needs within this uncertain world she finds herself in. She, like other young people, sees problems associated with western secular life-style, especially in relation to marriage. She also has problems with Bangladeshi cultural norms. However, she has found a happy middle path in Islam, not necessarily rejecting western secular values or the Bangladeshi values entirely. She has found a practicing Muslim man who she thought tries to emulate the Prophet's examples in his behaviour and she hopes that it will work out for them. Many of the other women whom we interviewed spoke in a similar vein about the need for their husbands to be good practising Muslims.

So love within Islamic marriage should consist of kindness and mercy from both parties, and being treated well, in the way Prophet treated his wives. The wives should equally return similar treatment to their husbands. However, given that our interviewees are part of a patriarchal Bangladeshi culture, and also given that Islam gives leadership to husbands, it is the women who need much more than men to feel

more secure in the knowledge that their husbands will follow true Islam, and follow the example of the Prophet within their marital home.

It was not surprising that for almost all the young people we interviewed, both in Bangladesh and the UK, the time when they turned seriously to Islam coincided with the time when they started thinking seriously about marriage and so about their personal 'life project'. The time of marriage is also a time for reflection. Where is one heading? What kind of wife or husband does one want?

8. Cosmopolitan Consciousness, Anti-Western Critique and Alternative Modernities

Despite their almost total submission to Islam and its principles for life, and their generally critical stance to 'Western', secular values, especially with issues to do with sex, marriage and family, these young people often demonstrate an open, cosmopolitan consciousness. They are often reflexive about their situation, and although they are critical about many aspects of modernity, they are certainly not opposed to modernity. They live in a modern state, and their mode of thinking is aligned in many ways to life in that state. None of them had serious interest in 'extremist' forms of political Islam. Their focus was on shaping a successful life for themselves and their children.

The situation they find themselves in has differences for young Bangladeshis in urban Bangladesh and young Bangladeshis in the UK, whether the latter are British born or recent migrants. Yet both groups are subjected to a common international culture of modernity, and while this certainly offers them opportunities, options and choices in their lives that their parents never had, it also comes with its drawbacks. Are there too many choices, one might ask? Is this plethora of choices always good for people? Certainly, there are arguments on both sides. However, it is within such contexts that we need to understand people's attraction to a more structured and a more guided life-style, and the appeal of religion as providing that structure and guidance. For young people from Muslim backgrounds, it is Islam that they turn to for structure and guidance, and this is of particular importance in the arena of marriage and family.

Yet it is worth asking, what precisely is it that these young people are most concerned about, when they emphasise so often the need for safety and security in marriage, and the promise of Islam in giving them this? As we have seen, a constant refrain is the fear of premarital sexuality and of infidelity in marriage, seen as specifically 'Western' problems against which a proper Islamic life style can provide protection. But why do young Bangladeshis seem so willing to buy into what are in the end quite traditional Bangladeshi values of pre-marital chastity and female seclusion, even as they partake in many ways in a culture of modernity? 'Western' culture certainly has its drawbacks and victims, but not all 'pubbing and clubbing' and premarital sexuality leads to disaster, and not all 'Western' marriages are loveless, adulterous failures ending in early divorce. Why are young Bangladeshis, particularly those who are actually living in a Western country, so ready to accept these exaggerated narratives of the moral decay of Western society?

We have already suggested one reason why such stories might mean something other than they seem. Islamic marriage is not just deployed as a defence against the West. It also often provides a way of guarding against an unwelcome arranged marriage that

might otherwise be imposed by one's own family. From this point of view, denunciation of Western values provides a common ground on which older and younger generations can agree, and perhaps helps to mask the more immediate conflict between parents and children. Given the relatively high rate of breakdown of arranged marriages among British South Asians, and significant levels of marital breakdown in Bangladesh itself, young Bangladeshis in both countries may be less concerned in reality with the threat of modernity than with the threat of an incompatible and unhappy arranged marriage. Islamic commitment, as we have seen, can be a way of negotiating an acceptable marriage partner.

It is worth looking though at the question of how far the various forms of modernist Islam with which young people are engaged could in fact be seen as 'alternative modernities,' as a way of sketching out an alternative vision for the future of society as a whole. This is a suggestion that was made some years ago by Suzanne Brenner, in relation to women involved in modernist Islamic organizations in Indonesia, and it is worth some discussion here as well.

We have written elsewhere about the popularity in Bangladesh of figures such as the TV evangelist Zakir Naik, who argues that everything of value in Western science has been anticipated by the Qur'an. Naik presents himself as a thoroughly modern figure, but the implication of his position is that while Western technology is acceptable, Western knowledge is of little real value except as a confirmation of the Qur'an. Naik tends to avoid direct political statements, but his position, like that of the Hizb-ut Tahrir or Jama'at-i Islami, ultimately implies the need for a radical reconstruction of society along Islamic lines.

There are perhaps two different questions worth considering here. One is the extent to which Islam is in reality on the way to constituting an alternative modernity, and a second is how far young Muslims are concerned with wider social and political issues.

The question of 'alternative modernities' got going in academic circles mainly in relation to East Asia, and the idea of a 'Confucian model' that might provide an alternative basis for modernity to that of Western Europe and North America. Writers on Islam, such as the French Turkish sociologist Nilüfer Göle, have been cautious about suggesting that Islam is in practice on the way to constituting a genuine alternative model for modernity; Göle argued some years ago that the programme of the radical Islamists was in reality much more cultural than political.

In fact, while many of our interviewees, both in the UK and in Bangladesh, saw Islam as under threat from Western secularism and a US-dominated world order, few of them seemed especially interested in bringing about an Islamic state.

What was more on the agenda, perhaps, was the moral reform of society. This was certainly part of the Hijaz Community's programme. As its website stated, the community "aims to create a shared vision of an enriched community working to bring harmony and civic responsibility back to the heart of society". They envisaged a society where the local community tends to its own needs, in balance with the needs of everyone and everything around it.

How far this constitutes a realistic programme within contemporary British society is perhaps less the point than the extent to which it provides an ideal, phrased in contemporary terms, around which the lives of young people could be oriented. We would not want to suggest that the practical issues of negotiating marriages and

handling conflicts with parents were the only reasons why people become involved in an organization such as Hijaz, or become seriously involved in Islam in their lives more generally. The idealism and the personal commitment of many of our interviewees is real and genuine. What we would suggest, though, is that the practical relevance of the modernist versions of Islam adopted by these young people to everyday problems in their lives also plays a significant part.

9. Conclusion

This is only a brief presentation of what we are finding so far as part of our project. We still have a large amount of material to study and analyse, including hundreds of hours of interviews from both Bangladesh and the UK. We have several articles published and forthcoming from the project, and are planning a book that will present our results in detail and at length. We hope though that this introduction will have given a general idea of what we are doing.

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Research Group on the Body, Health and Religion (BAHAR)

BAHAR is a network of researchers on the body, health and religion. BAHAR stands for the Body, Health and Religion, but the word bahar also refers to the spring season, youth and vitality in Urdu, Farsi, Turkish, and other Asian languages. Our members are scholars of anthropology, religion, theatre, psychology, and other academic disciplines, as well as people working with the body in dance, movement and therapy, and creative artists in words, music, the visual arts and other dimensions. The BAHAR network has more than sixty members in many different countries including the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, Malta, Canada and Australia. The network is directed by Geoffrey Samuel.

BAHAR was originally formed at Cardiff University in Wales, UK in March 2008, and is based at Cardiff University's School of History, Archaeology and Religion. The BAHAR Research Group is involved in cross-cultural studies involving the Body, Health and Religion and the interrelationships that exists between them. Our orientation is essentially interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary. For BAHAR, the body refers to our psycho-physical being in the world as an embodied experience. Health refers to not just the absence of disease or recovery from physical trauma but the achievement of optimal human functioning at all levels. This involves also the relationship between individuals and the communities of which they form part, and between both and their wider environment. We see these relationships as needing to be understood in social and cultural terms as much as in those of biology or human ecology. Cross-culturally, the relationships between body and health, and between individual, community and environment have most often been expressed in a religious idiom, and the third major research component of BAHAR concerns the spiritual dimension of human life.

Current and recent BAHAR projects include

Religious Nationalism and Sustainability in the Asia Pacific Region (ARC, 2005-7)

Longevity Practices and Concepts in Tibet (AHRC, 2006-9)

Islam and Young Bangladeshis (ESRC, 2008-10)

Tibetan Bon Medicine (Leverhulme Trust, 2008-11)

Ongoing research relating to the Taff River Valley in South Wales (2008-)

If you are interested in joining BAHAR or simply in coming to any of our activities and events, please e-mail Geoffrey or contact the BAHAR Office. Students interested in taking postgraduate degrees (PhD or Masters) with the BAHAR group at Cardiff University should also contact Geoffrey in the first place.

For further details about BAHAR, see
<http://www.bodyhealthreligion.org.uk/BAHAR/>
or contact Geoffrey Samuel
at SamuelG@cardiff.ac.uk