

Muslim Professionals Forum



The value of the 2011 Census for Muslim civil society

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A Common Platform *for* Professionals

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When the Office for National Statistics first published data on the 2011 Census, there were several melodramatic headlines in some sections of the media, for example:

Alien nation: The new census reveals a Britain that would be unrecognisable even to our grandparents.

Peter Hitchens in the Daily Mail, 15 December 2012

I feel like a stranger where I live... it feels as if they [the Muslims] have taken over.

Jane Kelly in the The Telegraph, 29 January 2013

The facts from the Census are that the population of England and Wales is 56 million. There are 2.71 million Muslims in England and Wales, or 4.8% of the population. There are 77,000 Muslims in Scotland and 3,800 in Northern Ireland. This demographic reality should be firmly kept in mind: Muslims comprise less than 1 in 20 of the overall population. The media headlines that Muslims are ‘taking over’ are pure scaremongering.

There has been a significant increase in the Muslim population since 2001, when it was 1.6 million but this can be explained by various factors such as a young population at the child-rearing stage of life and new settlements from Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia. The research also points to a greater geographical dispersal of the BME population, giving lie to the charge of self-segregation. What is noticeable, however, is the Muslim and BME population in inner city areas because of historical settlement patterns and ‘white flight’.

The Census results are essential for much decision-making in local and central government and the allocation of public resources. The focus of this presentation is the significance and implications of census data for Muslim civil society in particular. Too often, the national conversation about Muslims tends to focus on counter-extremism or counter-terrorism. The Census output is an opportunity for Muslim civil society to set its own agenda on what are its matters of real concern and policy priorities.

By Muslim civil society is meant the networks of mosques and Islamic centres, the charities, our associations of businessmen and women and professionals, and advocacy bodies like the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). The Muslim community has a tradition of social and political activism, self-help and business enterprise. We now need to draw on this heritage and seek inspiration from it, to face the challenges and scenarios ahead.

There are at least four areas requiring reflection and further discussion. First, the Census is telling us something about the place of religion in society today, which has implications for Muslims as ambassadors of a noble faith. Second, it is an opportunity for better self-recognition of what we are as a community, particularly our internal diversity. This has implications both on the structure of our mosques and community centres, as well as BME alliances. Third, the need to focus on youth and education, and finally, the census has uncovered some social realities which require both short-term and long-term work. The common thread is the emphasis on the community's responsibilities, whether acting independently or in partnership with other sections of society.

Religion in society today

The census question on religion is a simple one: it requires a tick box response to the question, 'What is your religion', where the tick boxes are the 6 major faiths and also 'No religion' and 'Religion not stated'. There is also a write-in box for 'Any other religion'.

About 67% of the population ticked one of the 6 major faith boxes. But what about those who did not? Professor Linda Woodhead has carried out further research on this group:

When people tick "no religion" in the census, most of them don't mean secular. Only 9% are consistent atheists and more than a third believe in life after death. What they mean is that they're not religious, or Christian, in a traditional sense...People more often speak of themselves as spiritual. They reject religion when it narrows their horizons and traps them in dogmas and rules. They are often uncertain whether God exists, but they don't reject the possibility. Seventy per cent of us believe in a soul and 53% in life after death, and the numbers have been rising.¹

The Census responses to the 'other religion' question were also interesting: for example 'Pagan' for around 60,000, and 'Spiritualist' or 'Spiritual' for about 55,000. A not insignificant number of the population seems to be on a spiritual search.

If there are many people seeking answers to the bigger questions of life then it seems there is a role for a faith community that promotes a sense of the sacred. I particularly like this editorial statement in the Catholic journal *The Tablet* some years ago on the occasion of Lent, which captures the possibility of Muslims acting as role models:

¹Linda Woodhead, A British Christmas has lost faith in rituals, but not religion
<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/dec/23/lost-faith-in-rituals-not-religion>

Friday abstinence from meat, and Lenten fasting, were obligatory for Catholics until about 40 years ago... "Fish on Friday" is not yet too much of a forgotten folk memory to be beyond revival, and the value of such symbols of shared identity needs rediscovering. Catholicism received an injection from Islam in the Middle Ages, for which it has every reason to be eternally grateful, and it is to Muslims that Catholics can turn now for inspiration in the value of fasting.²

Of course the proviso is that we Muslims live up to their precepts of our faith and act as proper ambassadors of their religious tradition – in terms of honest and upright behaviour, moral values, and cordiality to others. Professor Linda Woodhead, reflecting recently on the role of the Church, observed that the time seemed ripe for rediscovering it as society's 'saving asset'.³ In the same spirit, the Muslim voice in Britain has the potential of serving as a 'living witness'. Muslims are after all the second-largest faith group after Christians. The census tells us that there are more Muslims than all the other non-Christian faith groups put together, but can we become a community of conscience for the common good?

The Muslim presence in campaigns such as for the Living Wage, rights for asylum seekers and justice for Palestinians are good indications. Similarly the way a number of Muslim-heritage Parliamentarians have responded to their inner voice is commendable: Sadiq Khan MP on the European Convention of Human Rights; Roshana Ali MP on bombing in Iraq; Shabana Mahmood MP on the right to protest on Gaza; Baroness Warsi resigning from Cabinet on Gaza.

Implications on the structure of mosques and community bodies and the BME coalition

There are two demographic factors to be considered, the age profile and ethnic diversity.

Firstly, the Muslim population, in common with the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population, has a different age profile to the rest of the population. It is younger than the overall population with a much greater proportion of age 15 years or under, and a much smaller proportion over 65 than in the overall population.

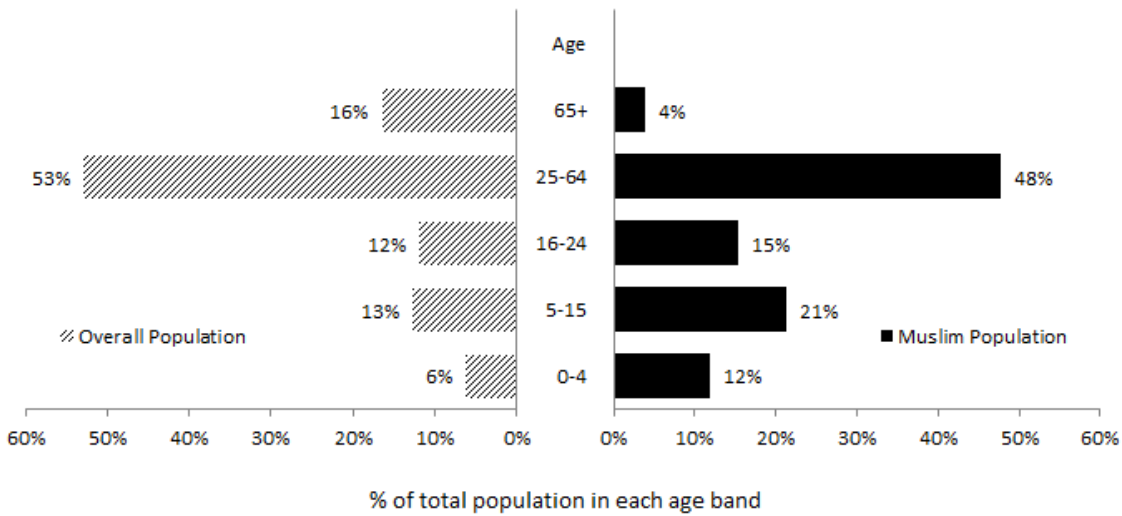
33% of the Muslim population was aged 15 years or under in 2011 compared to 19% of the overall population; only 4% of Muslims were aged 65 or over compared to 16% of the overall population.

² The Tablet, International Catholic Weekly, 4 March 2006

³ Church Times, 14 February, 2014

<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2014/14-february/features/features/measuring-the-church%E2%80%99s-social-footprint#>

Figure 1: Overall Population and Muslim Population Age Profile



The median age of the Muslim population is 25 years, compared to an overall population median age of approximately 40 years means.

Secondly, the Muslim community is ethnically diverse with significant numbers of Muslims from every ethnicity category recorded in the census. The largest ethnic category is ‘Asian’. One in twelve Muslims are from white ethnic groups and 10% are from black ethnic groups. The ethnic diversity is increasing as the proportion of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims is falling and the proportion of Muslims in the ‘Black African, Black other’ and ‘Asian other’ is rising.

Now what are the implications for the governance of institutions within the Muslim voluntary sector? Clearly to be inclusive and representative, mosque management committees need to empower young persons, including women, and ensure ethnic diversity in the decision-making circles. The MCB for example has taken a step in this direction by writing into its constitution a reserved quota for women in its national council.

With 1 in 3 of the BME community being Muslim, community organisers have a basis for cementing alliances and coalitions across civil society to address shared concerns relating to continuing race inequalities and colour and cultural racism. In the words of one community organiser, ‘What is good for BME, is good for Muslims’.

The responses to the religion question points to another area of convergence and shared values: of the 56 million population in England and Wales, 48 million are in the 'White' ethnic category of the census, leaving 8 million BME. The proportion in the BME ethnic category who ticked the 'No Religion' tick box is 1 in 12, compared to 1 in 4 in the White population. So our alliances can be both within an anti-racist coalition and an interfaith partnership.

Focus on Youth and Education

As a result of settlement patterns - and even though there is evidence of a reduction in residential segregation - the percentage of Muslim children of school age is very high in some inner city wards. For example in Tower Hamlets, which is overall 35% Muslim, over 60% of all children aged 5 to 15 are Muslim. In the West Midlands, Muslims make up 7% of the population of West Midlands; however in the Washwood Heath ward in Birmingham, 86% of all children aged between 5 to 15 years are Muslim.

The 2011 Census indicates that 26% of Muslims aged 16 and over have no qualifications; the percentages for Hindus and Sikhs are 13% and 19% respectively. The tragedy is that when Muslim activists take the initiative to improve educational standards in state schools, reduce exclusions and provide role models and leadership, this is branded as 'entryism' or 'extremists' taking over. The anguish is palpable in the resignation letter of Tahir Alam, governor of one of the schools targeted in the Trojan Horse saga:

The truth is that no one much cared about the young people of East Birmingham when their schools were failing them for decades, when most were leaving without sufficient qualifications to move to further education or get a decent job. That is because very few expected much more of these predominantly Muslim children... The message from Government to the communities of East Birmingham seems clear: we don't recognise your efforts. You may choose to come to these schools, but you are not to be trusted to play any part in decision-making about how they are run. Well we are proud to have played our part...⁴

⁴ Statement from Park View Educational Trust, 15 July 2014

[http://www.parkview.bham.sch.uk/ckeditor_image/PVET%20Verbal%20Statement%20by%20Tahir%20Alam%2015th%20July%202014\(1\).pdf](http://www.parkview.bham.sch.uk/ckeditor_image/PVET%20Verbal%20Statement%20by%20Tahir%20Alam%2015th%20July%202014(1).pdf)

For Muslim community groups, the challenge is not to become disheartened but remain educational activists for the sake of the next generation: Waterloo may have been won on the playing fields of Eton; the future of British Muslims is being decided in Alum Rock.

Muslim civil society is playing its part, with many mosques now running tutorial classes and providing mentoring. There are ideas emerging from research, such as Matthew Wilkinson's findings on the teaching of history at Key Stage 3. He recommends the creation of three-way parent-teacher-community partnerships to improve educational achievement:

Within this community of historical learning, the place of local imams and mosque-based teachers would be significant... these workshops might take the form, for example, of an annual history curriculum review to which parents and local religious teachers were invited that would provide for more meaningful collective Muslim-community input than the 10-15 minutes often allocated to each child's parents at school academic review meetings.⁵

While the Muslim voluntary sector has a role to play, it is only one of the stakeholders. What is needed is a political leadership that does not demonise Muslim activism and also celebrates the nation's Muslim and BME youth reservoir as a strategic asset at a time when the proportion of senior citizens is increasing.

The former Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government, John Denham MP, has recently made an insightful observation relevant to present-day preoccupations:

[...]young people are rarely radicalised by ideas alone. It's the emotional and social connections, the sense of meaning and purpose that attract. Too many young Muslims share that sense of alienation, voicelessness and injustice. Feelings of rejection, stereotyping, powerlessness and double standards are commonplace. This does not make them terrorists. It makes them vulnerable.⁶

The issue of educational underachievement of course cannot be viewed in isolation. A large proportion of the Muslim population, like the BME population, live in the poorer, deprived

⁵ Matthew Wilkinson, *History Curriculum, Citizenship and Muslim Boys: Learning to Succeed*, PhD Thesis, King's College London, 2011.

⁶ John Denham, *New Statesman*, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/09/why-isn-t-counter-radicalisation-working>

neighbourhoods. There are well-established correlations between neighbourhood deprivation and poor general health, and between low family income and educational underachievement. With public sector cuts in youth services, there will be a reduced safety net in terms of counselling services and provision of recreational services. If faith groups are expected to step in, then there has to be proper funding to build capacity and expertise.

The social realities and demand for services

There are four aspects to be highlighted – the variation in household types, elderly care; the prison population and health inequalities

Household Types.

There are about 260,000 Muslim households with dependent children – 35% compared to 15% for the overall population. This is consistent with the younger age profile. Muslims are also less likely to be cohabiting than the population as a whole, reflecting the cultural and religious values of the Muslim community. However, there are also over 77,000 Muslim lone parent families with dependent children. And there are over 135,000 one-person Muslim households. Our mosque imams need to be made aware of the scale of social realities such as single parent families and social isolation.

In all the census presentations I have given in mosques and community centres, these are four statistics that cause greatest surprise:

Elderly care.

While the Muslim and BME population is showing a bulge in the younger age bands today, this will mean an increase in the older population in the years ahead. In a decade from now there will be approximately 190,000 Muslims in the 65 to 84 year old age band, based on a simple extrapolation of the population in the 55 to 74 year old age population in 2011, not taking into account mortality and emigration. Steps are needed to ensure the availability of culturally and religiously sensitive elderly care for those who need it, i.e. care homes tailored to the needs of Muslims. This calls for a partnership of the voluntary sector, social enterprise organisations, philanthropists and entrepreneurs.

Prison population.

For Census purposes, the enumeration of the prison population applies to persons serving a sentence of 6 months. The Muslim prison population is disproportionately large, including offenders in the younger age bands. More up-to-date data on the prison population is available from the Ministry of Justice. Muslims account for 4.8% of the overall population but 13% of the prison population in England and Wales (including both British and non-British nationals). Offenders are generally young men, and the Muslim population has a disproportionate number in the younger age bands, which can account for the higher number of Muslim prisoners. Muslim civil society needs to better understand the underlying factors and see what it can do. There are already some good-practice projects – such as the shelter provided by the Date Palm Project for young Muslim prison leavers.

Tackling health inequalities.

The percentage of Muslims in self-declared ‘bad or very bad health’ for all age groups is 5.5%, which is similar to the overall population in this category of 5.4%. However this is deceptive, because younger people are generally healthier. Given the greater proportion of Muslims in the younger age bands the expectation would be for a significantly reduced proportion of the Muslim population with health problems compared to the rest of the population. The factor at play is the disproportionate bad health in Muslims over the age of 65, particularly women. The census indicates that 38% of them are in bad or very bad health as compared to 16% of women over 65 overall – more than twice as much.

The influential Marmot Review has noted:

Inequalities in health arise because of inequalities in society – in the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age [...] the magnitude of health inequalities is a good marker of progress towards creating a fairer society. Taking action to reduce inequalities in health does not require a separate health agenda, but action across the whole of society.⁷

⁷The Marmot Review ‘Fair Society, Health Lives’. Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post-2010’, 2012

<http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/Content/FileManager/pdf/fairsocietyhealthylives.pdf>

Health practices seem to be failing the Muslim community as demonstrated by poor health outcomes. Of course Muslim civil society and in particular mosques too have their role to play in promoting healthier life styles.

Conclusion

The MCB will shortly be publishing its report on the census data and I am glad to say that it also highlights the positive developments in the last 10 years since the 2001 census. For example there are proportionally more Muslims who are self-employed, full-time or part-time, compared to the overall population (9.4% and 8.9% respectively). There are proportionally more Muslims in the 'small employer and own account worker' category, compared to the overall population (9.7 and 9.3% respectively). Perhaps there is something in the community's religious values and precepts which encourages entrepreneurial activity?



Dr. Jamil Sherif

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