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The Case of the Ihsan Community in
Norwich

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Drawing from ethnographic research conducted among a community of Muslim converts in Norwich, UK, this paper explores the relationship between religion and modernity and

*“Those who suffer most,
attain to the greatest perfection.”*

This research would not have been possible without the assistance of my informants and the hospitality of the Ihsan community. In particular, I am indebted to Hajj Khalil Mitchell for his enthusiasm and generosity of spirit and for allowing me to use some of his pictures. My gratitude also goes out to my supervisor Dr. Claire Dwyer, who has been supportive, interested and helpful in refining my discourse. Prior to writing my proposal, I also benefited from explorative conversations with Dr. Tariq Jazeel and Dr. Ben Page.

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intimately intertwined and that the continuity of religion in modern society is also due to

problematic. Some scholars have argued that it is incoherent, ambiguous about the transition it supposedly marks and that its prefix betrays an inadequacy to fully come to terms with the present (Mufti 2013:8-9; Camilleri 2012:1019-1020). However, if we understand the post-secular not as a moment of religious resurgence, but as a socio-political and intellectual condition in which secular and religious discourses and practices *continue* to displace and engage one another (Sheringham 2010:1681; Pasha 2012:1043) and take the 'post' to designate an emergent recognition that secularity is not an inevitable outcome of modernisation (Habermas 2008a:20), then it can still serve as a useful concept for theory production. Its problematic effectively renders modernity unresolved, beckoning scholars to revisit the question of how religion operates under modern conditions, in both its adaptive and constitutive capacities (see Schewel 2014). With this understanding, I approach the post-secular city as an urban space of negotiation, contestation and innovation, within which a range of familiar dichotomous constructs are increasingly being destabilised, giving rise to 'new relations of possibility' (Beaumont Baker 2011:1-2).

Immigration is undoubtedly implicated in the construction of the post-secular city. Yet, we have to be cautious not to overemphasise causality and narrowly equate the influx of migrants from the Global South with the sacralisation of secular urban space in the West (e.g.

from modernity, science, technology and mobility, whereas Islam was left behind in its shadow as that barbaric Other (Gregory 2004:5; Masuzawa 2005:184-186).

While it is true that with decolonisation and secularisation these imperial and theological relations have given way to new geo-political structures within which a different logic operates, I agree with Said's (1978) observation that, in spite of its 'manifest' form changing, the Orientalist project has essentially remained unaltered (p.206). That is, although discussions of Islam have now been cast into a predominantly secularised and seemingly neutral language, the 'existential paradigms' of bygone ages continue to be active components in the production of Islam's foreignness and inferiority (p.120-121).

In order to sidetrack these divisive forces and in line with my position regarding the post-secular condition, I believe it is necessary to move beyond the confines of the postcolonial migratory framework when thinking about the Islamic presence in Europe. Responding to Asad's (2003:159-166) statement that Europe's exclusivist historical self-understanding poses a formidable obstacle to Islam's full incorporation into Europe, this

debate and social reform, he reads the discussions which emerge as a result of these sermons as being situated between free liberal deliberation and a top-down imposition of norms (cf. Schulz 2007). Mahmood's (2005) study, likewise, analyses a self-educative endeavour among Muslim women

From February until August 2015, I conducted ethnographic research among a Muslim community affiliated with the Ihsan mosque in Norwich, Norfolk.¹ I selected this community because, unlike the majority of Muslim communities in Britain which are of a diasporic nature, the Ihsan community grew out of a small band of British converts who embraced Islam in the late '60s and early '70s. This historical background makes this case especially suitable to rethink the post-secular condition and shift our attention to the substantive features of Islam in relation to modernity. In this regard, I should point out that this study is not concerned with the everyday life of individuals and the personal challenges they face in trying to become pious, but rather with understanding the community as a whole, its aspirations, justifications and modes of action, in relation to present-day society.

I entered the field with the following research questions: What are the conditions under which the earliest members of the Ihsan community came to embrace Islam and establish their mosque? How is piety understood and how does this understanding relate to modernity at large? What are the issues that arise in trying to emplace this Muslim community in a post-secular European city when, instead of foreignness, we take indigeneity as our point of departure? Centering these questions around an interest in conditions, thought and practice has enabled me to identify relevant theoretical concepts in close association with the actual concerns and practices current in the community. In answering these questions, I have aimed to nuance our understanding of the post-secular condition and the interlinked process of religious transformation; to critically think about Islam in a European context; and

which aims to achieve a dynamic balance between objectivism and subjectivism, this means that I not only sought to avoid romanticising the reality under study, but also that I allowed myself to change in the process. In this sense, beyond a mere intellectual enterprise, my research was profoundly spiritual in nature, impelling me to reflect on my own being.

With respect to how I aimed to read the reality of my informants, I tried to avoid the pitfalls of representationalism, which reduces bodily and discursive forms to mere signifiers of meaning (Jackson 1983; Stoller 1997). Instead, following Asad's (1993) critique of symbolism, I read bodily practices and discourses not as expressions, but constituents of piety, enabling me to actually participate in pious formation alongside my informants. Yet, at no point did I entertain the illusion that my 'going native' in the phenomenological sense completely aligned my experience with that of my informants. Throughout the entire process I remained first and foremost a researcher with aims differing significantly from those of the friends and acquaintances I made in the field.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted informal and semi-structured interviews with some of the earliest members, regular believers and certain leading figures who are associated with the Muslim Faculty of Advanced Studies, an academic fellowship established by the Ihsan and dedicated to articulating the roots of and solutions to society's problems (see Appendix III). Except when circumstances did not allow me to do so or when I was expressly asked not to, I was able to record and transcribe these interviews. As to the style of these interviews, I attempted to engage in what I describe as a form of *on-the-ground collaborative philosophy*. Beyond merely situating myself between 'naiveté' and 'foreknowledge' and providing my informants with ample space to speak on their own terms (Kvale 2007:12-13), I approached them as near-to-equal collaborators in the process of identifying relevant issues; deciding on the direction of our discussions; ascertaining the merit of claims encountered in the literature; assessing descriptions expressed by other informants; and reflecting on my own interpretations. In practice, this often meant conducting an interview with only two or three main questions in mind and letting the conversation unfold in an organic manner.

I would argue that this mode of research differs from what has been termed a 'collaborative ethnography' (Lassiter 2005:3-7). Beyond involving 'the natives' in reading the ethnographic reality –an approach which still assumes the ethnographic to constitute a fixed object of analysis– I consciously conceived my research to be a *productive period of enquiry*. That is, in recognition of the inevitable changes that occur through the act of

research itself (Atkinson & Hammersley 1998:111), I utilised discursive activities and interviews as opportunities to critically discuss issues which extend beyond the ethnographic. These discussions were not merely productive in the sense that they assisted me in gaining a clearer insight into the community, but also because they shaped my own thinking and presumably that of my informants in the process.

As to my analysis, I adopted a moderately grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1998), in which I sought to understand the meanings and actions of participants in their own terms.

The data analysis process consisted of

systematically coding the data

The data analysis process consisted of systematically coding the data, identifying themes, and then organising these themes into a coherent structure. This process was iterative and ongoing, with the researcher refining their understanding of the data as they analysed it. The final output of the analysis process is a set of themes and sub-themes that provide a comprehensive overview of the data.

just function, but you can't...Almost everyone is on some kind of pill!...You need community. Every human being needs community."

This longing for community life was a decisive factor in most of my informants' conversion stories. Every time I ventured to talk about 'society at large', I was taken aback by their outright denial of its existence in contemporary Britain. In their view, modernisation has completely stripped Britain of its communal foundations. –its

informants' conversions should be seen as a direct rejection of atheism and a general sense of disillusionment with –or even disgust of– certain features of modernity. This confirms the idea that the continuity of religion in a modern European context is not merely a matter of diasporic struggles for survival, but that modernity itself produces its own countercultural subjectivities, rendering some susceptible to alternative perspectives on reality and conceptions of the 'good life'.

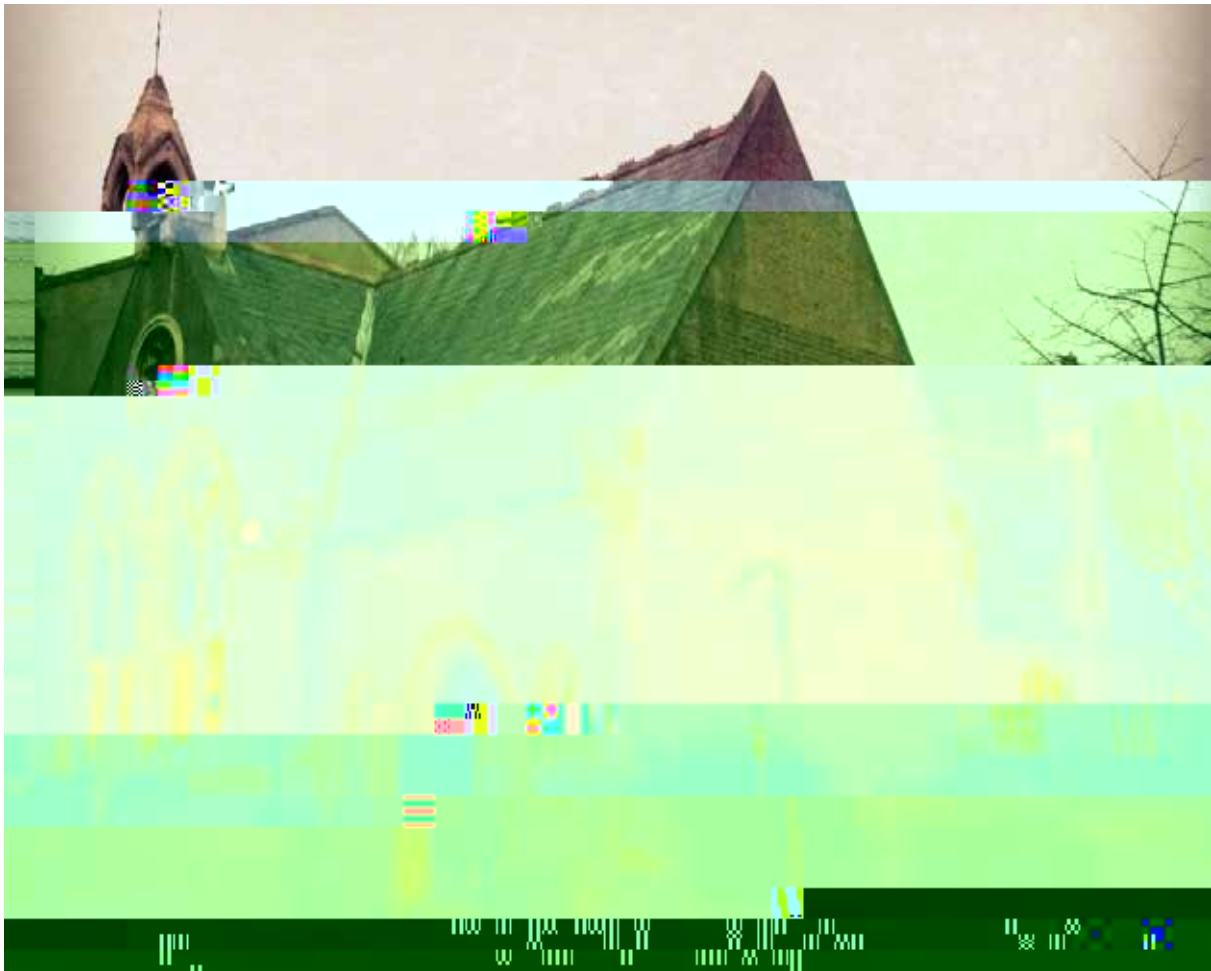


Figure 2: The Ihsan mosque. Source: Khalil Mitchell.

Taking stock of these accounts, we may be tempted to circle back to the very idea that I aim to unsettle, namely, that Islam is fundamentally at odds with modernity. However, without jumping to conclusions, it should be made clear that it is not societal change or progress that my informants are opposed to. On the contrary, if we take modernity to imply the replacement of community life by an impersonal political machinery, the imposition of a secularist perspective on society, the rise of rampant individualism, an economic mindset which disregards both human and environmental considerations and the reduction of human

interaction to a mere exchange between producers and consumers, then it is more befitting to assert that Islam holds the power to move its adherents to subscribe to a fundamentally different understanding of what constitutes true progress and prosperity.

Alternatively, if we dismiss these features as befittingly depicting modernity and

within the cultural make-up of a secular-materialistic modernity. This insight may eventually assist us in articulating a more nuanced understanding of the continuity of religion in the modern world which, besides migratory processes and globalisation, takes discontent and susceptibility into account. In the next section, building on the notion of falseness, I delve into the question as to how piety is understood and aspired unto by the Ihsan community and begin to emplace the community in the context of the post-secular city.

Contrary to my expectations with regard to piety, the Ihsan community is not overly concerned with bodily practice as a pathway to self-realisation. In fact, on a number of occasions, during informal gatherings and various interviews, the condition of Muslim communities associated with salafism or wahhabism was referred to with great disapproval. As is clear from recent research, these revivalist movements seek to achieve piety through an endeavour to stringently discipline oneself in terms of speech, emotions, demeanour, thought, appearance and ritual practice -i.e. the focus is on form (Mahmood 2005; Hirshkind 2006; Gauvain 2013). Although the aim of the salafi is geared towards reviving the "...original community of Islam", as one of my informants explained, "what they arrived at is certainly not an original template of Islam!"¹¹ In addition to general discussions about wahhabism at the global level, a palpable tension was also manifest in the city itself.

Apart from the Ihsan mosque, Norwich harbours two other mosques: one which is based around a Bangladeshi community and another, which my informants called the 'Saudi mosque'.¹² When in the company of my informants, whether sitting at one of the local café's or whilst strolling to the mosque, our conversations were often interrupted by other members of the Ihsan as they approached to greet us and exchange pleasantries. Yet, seldom –if ever– were greetings exchanged between my informants and the members of the other mosques. I would not go so far as to interpret this as indicative of mutual disdain, but the silence marking these encounters definitely conveyed a sense of estrangement. Surprisingly, I met a few men, such as Rashid, who frequent both the Ihsan and the Saudi mosque. One day, after prayer, he told me that many of his fellow Algerians pray in the Saudi mosque, whereas he preferred to practice his faith among the 'converts'. In contrast to the Saudi's, he stated, converts are far less rigid when it comes to deviations in style. They focus on intention, rather than form. As an example, he told me that after prayer he is accustomed to expressing his hope to others that their prayer will be accepted by God. To his great dismay, it is not uncommon in the Saudi mosque to be openly reprimanded for such an act. From

¹¹ Interview, Hajj Sadiq, 04-05-2015

¹² I was told that prior to the establishment of the Bangladeshi mosque, the Bangladeshi's practiced their faith at the Ihsan mosque. However, not being able to fully connect to the intellectual approach of the Ihsan and craving for a more familiar cultural experience, they eventually left the Ihsan to congregate elsewhere (Abdu'llah, 18-07-2015).

their perspective such well-wishing is 'adding to Islam', which is *haram* and bound to condemn the trespasser to the Fire.¹³

It was not long until, walking through the city, I was able to identify which Muslim was affiliated with which particular mosque, especially the women. Whereas women from the Ihsan community wear tightly bound colourful veils covering only their hair, women from the Saudi mosque wear their veil loosely, covering their hair, neck, nose and mouth. Notwithstanding the fact that the Saudi mosque predominantly harbours Arab Muslims and the Ihsan mosque mostly non-Arabs, ethnicity is not the central element which explains these differences. Rather, I would argue that these differences primarily spring from the varying standards of propriety to which each community is committed. In the case of the Ihsan, the female members of which are not only white British, but also from Caribbean, Moroccan and Pakistani backgrounds, it seems that a minimalist standard is upheld, covering only what is regarded as absolutely necessary and steering clear of what they deem to be mere cultural habits. At the same time, I would argue that these manners of dress also serve to enhance a sense of belonging to the community and are therefore constitutive of a novel cultural habit taking shape within the confines of the Ihsan.



Figure 3: Women at the mosque, demonstrating style of veil characteristic of the Ihsan. 18-07-2015

¹³ Informal interview, Rashid, 17-05-2015

Without rehearsing the Cartesian split between mind and body, I would argue that despite the obvious importance that Islam places on bodily refinement, the Ihsan community seems to be engaged in a process of pious formation which is primarily of a politico-intellectual nature. Gauging this process, I distinguish between two interdependent lines of action which I term the *lesser-personal* and the *greater-communal line of action*. The former, which centres around Islamic law and Sufist philosophy, aims towards the cultivation of virtues such as knowledge, pure-heartedness, selflessness and generosity, which is approximated through prayer, observing the fast, reciting the Qur'an, deepening, learning Arabic, travelling to Muslim cultural zones and moments of reflection. Although this personal endeavour is important, the greater-communal line of action seems to take precedence in the sense that it is only within a communal setting that one's pious self –which is equated to one's authentic human form– can come into being.

One effort, deemed

thing. The beloved Saudi brothers think they are untouched by it. They think they are preserving a pure Islam, but the more we look at it, the more we realise that we have been given something that they need."¹⁶

The danger with technological thinking, as my informants conceive of it, is that it reduces the acquisition of knowledge (*ilm*), which encapsulates insight (*irfan*), understanding (*fahim*), inspiration (*ilham*), faith (*iman*) and certitude (*iqan*), to a mere act of collecting information. The result of this reduction is exactly the type of collective life from which the Ihsan community seeks to distance itself, namely, one in which Muslims "...no longer use their heart and brains!"¹⁷

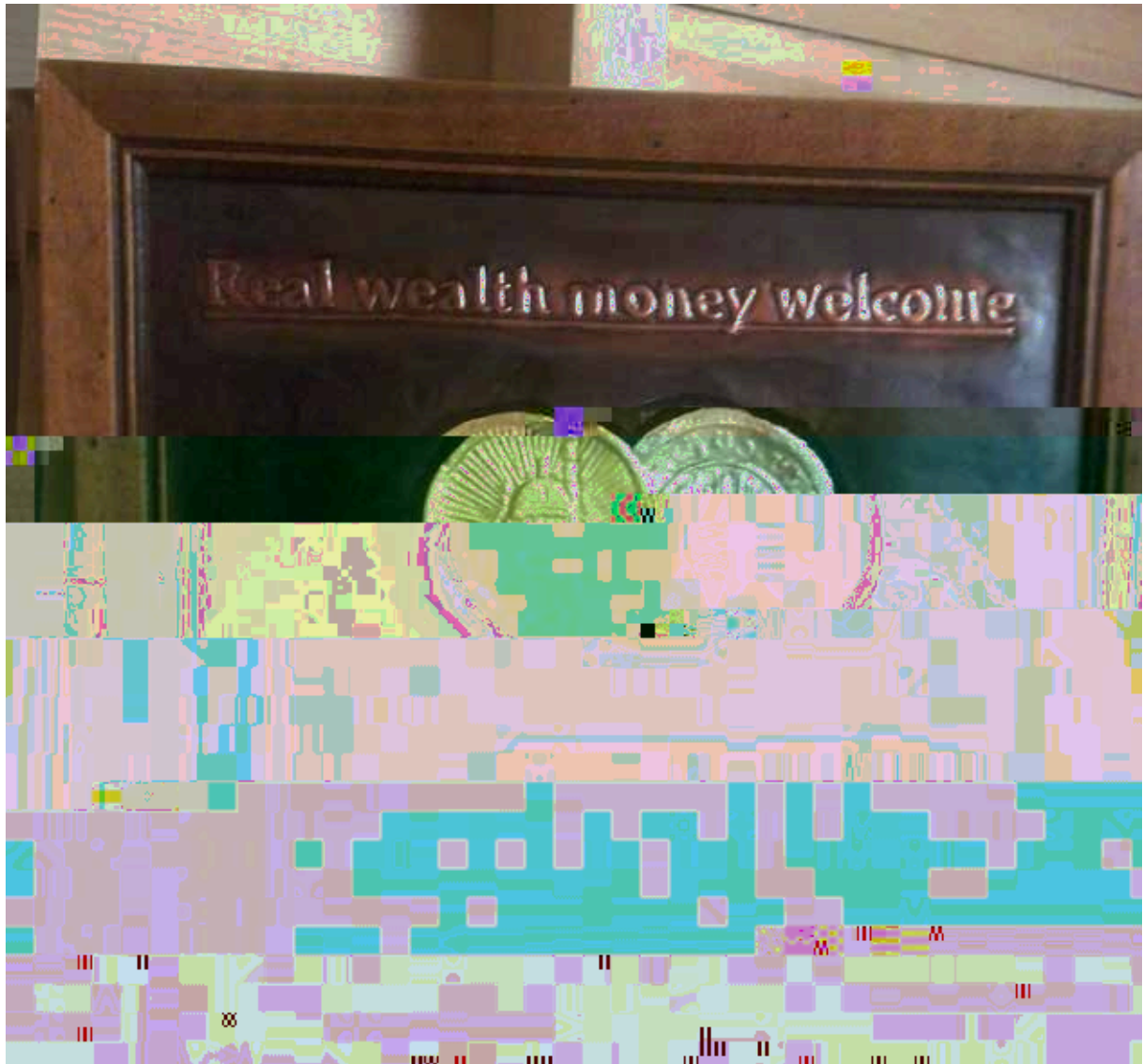


Figure 4: Sign displayed at the mosque's coffee stand, recognising the validity of Islamic money. 26-06-2015.

Akin to other revivalist movements, the model for these pious formations is Madina as it is believed to have been in the time of the Prophet and His companions. As a number of my informants pointed out, the best way to think about this is in terms of an island: a place of refuge that remains dry and safe while the rest of the world proceeds to sink. "These islands are definitely not turning away from the modern world," James said, "but they are determined to be true to everything of that original Madina pattern...and it's a question where the line is drawn, but the dedication is to uncover that in a lived, organic, bottom-up kind of way."¹⁹ Similarly, when explaining to me why it is so crucial for the community to stick together and seek each other's company, Sadiq referred to Islam as the only "island of

¹⁹ Interview, James, 25-05-2015

the enhancement of conversation, the establishment of a sound educational system and the recovery of a real-value based internal economy. In light of the former section, it should be apparent that these efforts, which ultimately serve to enable an authentic way of being, are intimately intertwined with the sense of falsity associated with the hegemonic structures of

Notwithstanding the brevity of my account so far, I believe it is safe to claim that the Ihsan community, from its inception until the present, is generally characterised by high-mindedness, creativity and critical thought.²³ Throughout my fieldwork, it has been equally clear, however, that the community does not easily allow itself to be emplaced within the contours of the city. Although there is a variety of reasons for this, I would argue that at the core it all comes down to its mode of engagement with wider society –i.e. the people, institutions, discourses and practices beyond

visitors at any time, especially during the fast, and the community periodically organises public discussions. However, these efforts are best interpreted as facilitative of *da'wah* (calling others to Islam) and not so much as an attempt to engage in a process of discursive production, within which each participant (both Muslim and non-Muslim) is an equal collaborator in the investigation of reality and potential contributor to societal progress. In this regard, I concur with Rosati (2010:421), who posits that a 'complementary learning process' characterised by 'epistemic humility' is essential if we aim to press forward under post-secular conditions (see Seligman 2004; Habermas 2008b:114-148).

Admittedly, it would be inaccurate to completely deny the presence of epistemic humility. Discourses in the community are saturated with references to non-Islamic philosophers such as Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and von Goethe.²⁵ As Sadiq explained, these thinkers are duly recognised for their keen insight into the human condition and deemed crucial to an understanding of how modernity has affected us all.²⁶ In this regard, and referring to Beaumont and Baker's (2011:1-2) 'new relations of possibility', I would argue that the community's outward engagement with existentialist philosophy testifies to a degree of humility with respect to 'other knowledges' and is indicative of its capacity to transcend the dichotomy of faith and reason.

In addition, the community's willingness to facilitate encou.9567r:

- I s l a 2 0 T d

Another reason which in my view works to disembed the community is related to a process which I term *self-orientalisation*. Gauging the community's practical forms, I tend to agree with its self-depiction as a genuine expression of British Islam. In fact, during one of my interviews, Sadiq's reflection struck me as particularly enticing:

"Islam is like a filter. The harmful elements of your culture remain in the filter and the best comes through. So in a way, for me personally, I have become more British, with the true meaning of authentic living that Britain had. You know, three-hundred years ago, men and women had nobility, honour, integrity, honesty. These are all attributes I found since I became Muslim."²⁷

On the one hand, the Ihsan community does indeed exhibit a degree of indigeneity. Apart from obvious ethnic markers, they typically wear Western clothes, maintain their accents, commonly serve English soup to break the fast and discuss politics with the same frustration as any other civically engaged Briton.

On the other hand, throughout my fieldwork, I could not help but notice that particularly the Moroccan lifestyle of times past is often spoken about in glowing terms, almost as a cultural form to aspire unto. Apart from glorifying the Orient of old, a process of self-orientalisation was also evident from particular practices such as dining from a shared platter on the floor; the saturation of daily language with Arabic phrases; the wearing of Oriental attire by the Imam during prayer; the Arabesque ornamentations adorning the mosque's interior; and, of course, the adoption of Arabic names. While I am in no way opposed to any such practices, it must be remembered that these are cultural-aesthetic practices and not necessarily integral to the Islamic Faith. Bearing this in mind, I concur with Haldrup *et al*



Figure 5: Breaking the fast in the mosque, dining from platters on the floor. Source: Khalil Mitchell.

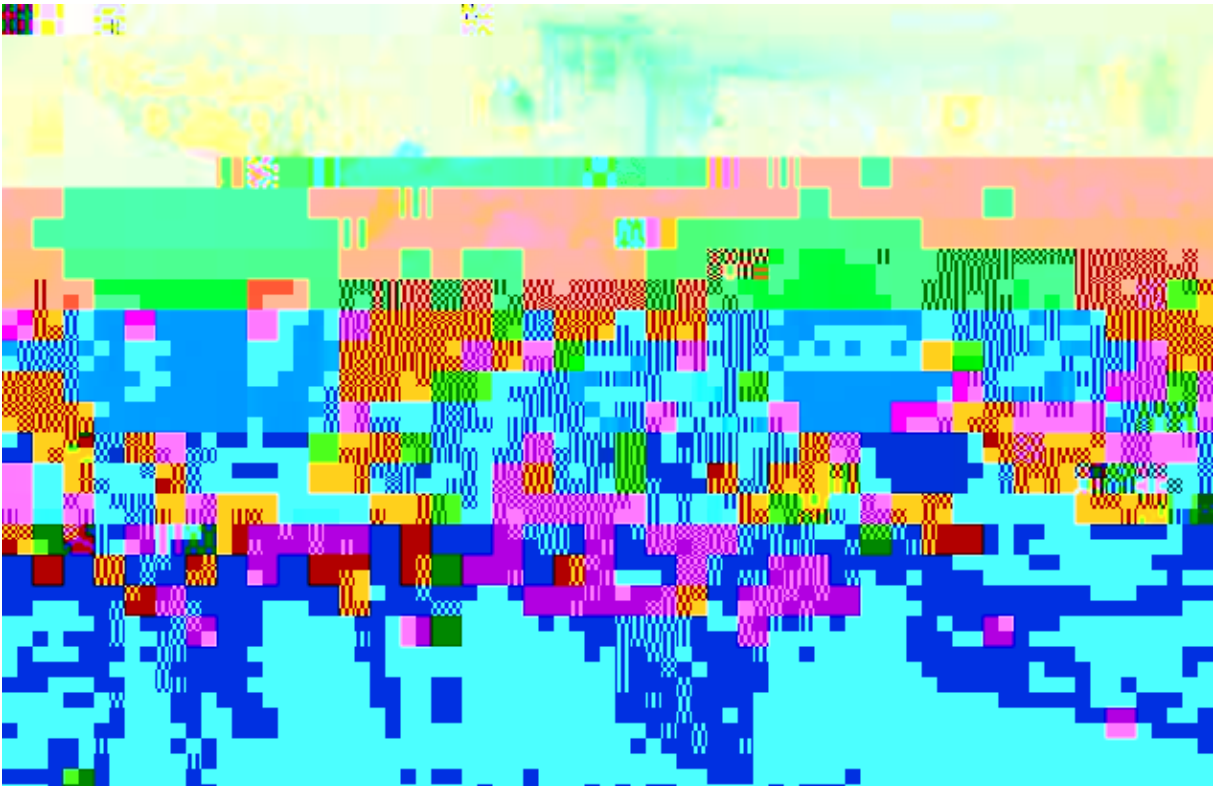


Figure 6: Male members in Oriental attire, celebrating the Prophet's birth. Source: Khalil Mitchell.

The reason why this warrants a critical reflection is that self-orientalisation may exacerbate contemporary processes of fragmentation, which are in themselves arguably inherent to modernity (Rosati 2010:415; Duschinsky 2012:23; Casanova 2001:1059). Of course, societal fragmentation is not a negative prospect *per se*. Disintegration is, after all, a vital prerequisite for any transformation. However, if we subscribe to the post-secularist recognition that the separation of politics and religion is artificial and unworkable and that a more cooperative relationship is needed across socio-epistemic communities (Salvatore 2006:553; Camilleri 2012:1028; Casanova 2001), then it seems all the more vital that the tendency of 'othering' (and 'selfing' for that matter) is overcome and replaced by a more spiritually informed cosmopolitan outlook, especially with respect to Islam and the West.

Then again, gauging these practices, one may also argue the opposite and interpret self-orientalisation not as an affirmation of Islam's otherness, but as a means by which the boundaries between the Orient and Occident can effectively be blurred, the hierarchy between the 'foreigner' and the 'native' can be somewhat equalised and a higher degree of inter-ethnic unification can be attained. This became particularly apparent to me during the celebration of *Eid al-Fitr*.²⁸ After the melodious recitation of *dhikr* (a devotional form), which had been loudly performed by more than fifty

possibility for religious transformation beyond mere syncretisation, reformation and revival.³⁰

This brings us to a final consideration of the sociologist Robert Bellah and his phenomenal work *Religion in Human Evolution* (2011). His basic thesis is that as the natural world evolved and gave rise to the human species, it has correspondingly enabled the progressive emergence of a range of religious forms. Aware of the dangers of applying evolutionist theory to social transformation, he stresses that the various types of religion which have emerged over time should not be thought of in terms of better or worse, but ‘...in terms of the capacities upon which they draw’ (p.xviii). While we may argue over the order of causality –claiming either that it is revelation which gives rise to human capacities, or that human capacities enable the birth of new religions– for now, the idea that these processes are dynamically correlated is sufficient.

Bellah writes: ‘Some have suggested that we are in the midst of a second axial age,’ a concept that he borrows from Karl Jaspers (2011) which denotes a pivotal time-period during which a new consciousness is born across civilisations. ‘If we are,’ he continues, ‘there should be a new cultural form emerging. Maybe I am blind, but I don’t see it’ (p.xix). While I am not inclined to read the Ihsan community as expressive of such a new cultural form, I would argue that both its pious aspirations and its particular mode of revivalism, by which it seeks to achieve these aspirations, do spring from a confrontation with a new consciousness and set of capacities that are unfolding in the modern world (see Lambert 1999). The question is whether or not Islam, which arose in a particular circumstance, sufficiently permits communities such as the Ihsan to embrace these shifting limits of awareness, draw upon the capacities which are being released and adequately respond the pressing needs of the contemporary world. Personally, I remain undecided, if not sceptical, and while examining the manners in which long established religions come to grips with the modern is important and should continue, I also deem it imperative to scan the horizon with a searching eye. Perhaps, in some place, a completely new cultural form is on the rise. One to which we are, as of yet, oblivious.

See Khan (2015) for a critical and theologically grounded consideration of finality in Islam.

The post-secular problematic has thrust religion back into the centre of academic and political discourse. How is it that, contrary to earlier expectations, religion has maintained a public presence in modern society? How is religion implicated in modernity's emergence? And in what ways does modernisation affect religious thought and practice? With this research, I sought to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between religion and modernity and think critically about Islam in a European context. The Ihsan community was particularly suitable for my purposes, as I intended to contemplate these matters from a standpoint of indigeneity, instead of taking the foreignness of Islam for granted.

Although it is obvious that the Islamic presence in Europe after World War II is primarily due to immigration, we cannot ignore the fact that Islam –just as much as Christianity, which likewise did not originate in Europe– constitutes a placeless (i.e. universal) claim to which both the peoples of the Orient and Occident have been called to respond. Failing to acknowledge this can only work to reduce Islam to a mere cultural artefact and solidify its essential foreignness. Such thinking inhibits us from fairly assessing Islam as an agent in history, operating either in conjunction with, as an alternative to or against the project of modernity. Without downplaying the importance of concerns over multiculturalism, I sought to steer away from these discussions to enable us to theorise about Islam in a modernising European context along different lines. I did so by recognising the historical interconnectedness between Islam and Europe and considering the possibility that the post-secular condition may be partially understood as an outcome of processes inherent to modernity itself. It is from this perspective that I approached the Ihsan.

As a follow-up to this project, I believe that visiting the Ihsan's sister communities in Spain and South Africa would help in gaining a deeper understanding of the Ihsan's transnational reality. In addition, by being more attentive to gender and ethnicity, further research could assist in refining our understanding of the relationship between Islamic piety and civic virtue. However, in the context of the present project, my time and resources did not allow me to pursue these subjects in more detail. Also, the limited scope of this project required me to narrow my focus so as to allow for sufficient depth.

Based on my findings, I developed the following arguments: Firstly, following the accounts of my informants, I argued that the presence of Islam in contemporary Britain is not merely due to immigration and diasporic reproduction, but also due to a reality which

emerged from within the structures of modernity. While travel, financial assistance and foreign influence were implicated, it was primarily due to a discontent with modern life and a subsequent thirst for social cohesion and meaning that the Ihsan came into being. Secondly, although the process of pious formation in which the community is engaged is powered by a desire to overcome the falsities of modern life, I argued that this should not necessarily be read as an affirmation of Islam's essential incompatibility with modernity. Rather, I took it to be suggestive of the community's commitment to a different understanding of progress.

Thirdly, in trying to understand the difficulty of emplacing the community in the city, I posited that the community's transnational structure, somewhat inward-oriented mode of operation and its self-orientalising tendencies work to disembed it from its locality as a site where inter-communal learning can potentially take place. This is a crucial point, as it relates to the normative question as to how society is to function under post-secular conditions and beckons us to consider which capacities communities will need to draw upon in order to proceed. Finally, I argued that despite its efforts to liberate itself from modernity, the Ihsan remains deeply locked within its

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