

# Introduction

## Religious Identity in the Process of Migration

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An estimated one million people left Iran during the course of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic.<sup>1</sup> For the past twenty-five years the waves of Iranians who emigrated to Britain, who are politically, religiously, socio-economically and ethnically heterogeneous, have found themselves in the ongoing process of settlement. The aim of this book is to explore facets of this process by examining the ways in which religious traditions and practices have been maintained, negotiated and rejected by Iranians from Muslim backgrounds in relation to the political, economic and social situation in Iran and Britain, and have served as identity-building vehicles during the course of migration. This investigation moves the spotlight away from the more visible and politicised Islamic movements to the everyday lives of Iranian Muslims living in London. It begins by introducing the wider field of studies that focus on religion during the process of migration. We shall see how the bulk of Britain's academic, political and popular discourses on minority religions have been developed in response to the settlement experiences of immigrants from its former colonies in the post-war period. The following also provides an overview to majority–minority relations that Iranians encountered upon their arrival in Britain.

Many research projects have shown that religiosity is often heightened by changes that occur in the process of migration.<sup>2</sup> The social significance of religion for migrants has often been categorised under the headings 'cultural defence' and 'cultural transition'. As Bruce points out,

when there is a people with a common religion dominated by an external force (of either a different religion or none at all), then religious institutions acquire an additional purpose as defenders of the culture and identity of the people. The role of religion in cultural transition involves religion acquiring an enhanced importance because of the assistance it can give in helping people to cope with the shift from one world to another.<sup>3</sup>

The implications of cultural identity have been central in questions relating to the contemporary migrations of people to Britain and the way they come to terms both with one another and with the dominant culture. The literature contains many, and sometimes conflicting, approaches which basically can be divided between the primordialist and instrumentalist perspectives. The primordialist view holds that identity flows from shared cultural-religious essences or symbolic values; the instrumentalist perspective maintains that individuals or groups assert particular identities because they provide a means to maximise their interests.<sup>4</sup> The primacy of cultural-religious divisions has been criticised by writers who argue that differential notions of culture fix collectivities, thereby mystifying them. As Eickelman and Piscatori observe:

The fundamental difficulty with both the primordial and instrumentalist perspectives is that they predicate the formulation of identity upon a reality that appears abstract and somewhat independent of those persons or groups who perceive and participate in it. The specific difficulty with the instrumentalist approach is that it imputes to actors an ordering and clarity of goals, but these goals are necessarily dependent upon ever-shifting cultural and social contests and are often ambiguous as a consequence.<sup>5</sup>

Critiques of such approaches have rightly pointed out the dangers of compartmentalising identities in the pursuit of a political project.

The following section discusses the various ways in which primordialist and instrumentalist perspectives have both been used in academic, political and popular discourses in analysing the significance of religion during the process of migration. We shall see how until the middle of the 1980s sociological studies of migration, race, ethnicity and religion gave little attention to the dynamics of religious traditions and practices in relation to processes of migration in Britain. This started to change in the 1980s and 1990s when religious identity became a feature of majority-minority relations and in turn played a more central role in both primordial and instrumental perspectives.

Sociologists of religion, particularly before the middle of the 1980s, were not engaged in studies that concentrated on the religions of ethnic groups. Roy Wallis and Steve Bruce observed that the sociologists of religion let this expansive area of study be ‘high-jacked’ by race and ethnicity and the sociology of race.<sup>6</sup> The ethnic school often formulated ethnicity as a shared culture and treated ethnic groups mainly as static communities facing problems of integration, assimilation and transmitting the shared culture to the second and third generations. By wrongly assuming that ‘ethnicity’ is always the primary identity marker of a group, this type of approach often treated religion as a passive and fixed concept, usually one of many other concepts such as language, dress, and food, used to define the ‘ethnic group’ or the concept ‘ethnicity’. This perspective often presupposed that social and cultural institutions were primordial, and therefore able to reveal the essential characteristics of an ethnic group.<sup>7</sup> The main problems with the primordialist project are that it treats groups as insular and internally homogeneous with

fixed cultural and symbolic values, and secondly it fails to think through the implications of ethnic groups constructing, maintaining and transforming their ethnic boundaries. This critique, which stems from Fredrik Barth's conceptualisation of ethnicity, draws attention to the constitution of markers of differentiation rather than its cultural characteristics.<sup>8</sup> As Brah points out, 'if ethnicity, following Barth, is not about communicating an already existing "difference" the political project, then, is crucially about identifying how narratives of "commonality" and "difference" are constituted and contested, and how these are marked by the conjuncture of specific socio-economic and political circumstances'.<sup>9</sup> This approach seeks to explain how the dynamic and changing significance of cultural difference and sameness are related to a range of signifiers, such as religious traditions and practices, and how and why they are drawn upon in varying combinations under specific situations.

Despite the efforts of Barth, the ethnic school continued to be criticised during the 1980s for not paying enough attention to the changing economic and political processes whereby markers of differentiation are constituted.<sup>10</sup> Sociologists who were mainly concerned with race and racism denounced the studies coming from the ethnicity school, for implicitly or explicitly reifying the 'white family' as the ideal norm and, as such, pathologising any differences in black community life. The criticisms of the assimilation model were also in response to the growing racial tensions directed towards non-white groups in the 1970s; minority groups increasing demands for rights and privileges; and the emergence of cultural racism practised by the New Right. It is important to point out that at this time migrants, who were mainly workers and their offspring from South Asia and the Afro-Caribbean, were principally defined in terms of their country of origin. Although this continues to be the case, religion has featured more dominantly in the vocabulary of identities.

## **Changes in the Academic Study of Migrant Religions in Britain**

There has been a growing trend in many countries and groupings facing chronic political and economic problems to base their politics on markers of identity, such as religion and ethnicity, in order to reorganise and mobilise mass popular support. As a result it has often been assumed that Western-led modernisation – in both its capitalist and socialist forms – is inherently different from and, therefore, incompatible with the fabric of other cultures who require their own unique social, economic and political systems. The critiques of the Western nation-state model have challenged Western theories which forecasted parallel outcomes in the process of modern social development. Such critiques have generated many contradictory reactions. There has been a growing trend, for instance, for Western commentators (for a variety of reasons and motivations) to assert that cultural–religious identities and differences have a determining role in the way social life is experienced. This has

been especially true in recent years as the ‘Islamic revival’, which has often been misperceived as a homogeneous movement, has increasingly been portrayed as a determining force in the way in which social life is constituted.

The growing presence of Muslims living in Europe has also led to an increasing number of discussions and debates concerning the public recognition of minority religions and their leaders, in light of the liberal and secular organising principles of European states. Starting with the New Right, the following section examines how religion, and in particular Islam, has received much greater attention. The Salman Rushdie affair in 1988–89 was particularly central in crystallising a number of apparent tensions, and in questioning the compatibility of Islamic values and Western principles. Debates on Muslim presence in British society have also become more centred in political, popular and academic discourses since the atrocities of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C. on 11 September 2001.

During the 1960s and 1970s, due to many factors such as the questions and debates concerning the changing dynamics of ethnic and religious identity in contemporary Britain, the economic recession, and the future of British national identity in light of the European Union, migrant groups (who were expected either to assimilate or return to their home countries) were increasingly seen as a ‘problem’. The series of Immigration Acts and Race Relation Acts that developed during this period were largely in response to social and political tensions surrounding the settlement of South Asian and Caribbean ex-colonial workers. The 1962, 1965, 1971 and 1981 Immigration Acts effectively stopped immigration and placed colonial migrant workers on similar legal footing with guest workers. The 1981 Immigration Act was particularly significant for the reason that it redefined British nationality in terms of *jus sanguinis*, which meant that a person having been born on British territory no longer determined citizenship. To be British a person must be born to parents of whom one is a British citizen.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that the debates and development of legislation concerning the inflow and management of migrants were carried out by both left- and right-wing politicians.<sup>12</sup>

### *The New Right*

A number of right-wing ideas and policies, based on ‘common sense’ political arguments that build a relationship between an ‘intuitive’ concept of culture and those of religion and nation, were incorporated into mainstream political debate and practice. Commentators such as Margaret Thatcher, Enoch Powell and writers of the *Salisbury Review* articulated their concerns about the unnatural process of immigration for both the immigrants and the host country, and how it would ruin the British, traditional way of life.<sup>13</sup> They deployed forms of rhetoric which set out to defend and preserve Britain’s culture, traditions and history from too many foreigners.<sup>14</sup> Barker writes: ‘The alleged invasion by foreign culture implies a particular theory of nation and of race. For the New Right, the nation is constituted by the homogeneity of culture, and the problem of race lies in the fact of cultural difference. Alien

cultures (not inferior, merely different) necessarily undermine social cohesion; this necessity derives from human nature. Such cultures must therefore be eliminated either by assimilation or by removal.<sup>15</sup>

Portions of the press have also played an important role in implementing and publicising these codes of references to ‘difference’ and alien cultures. As Nancy Murray states: ‘Powell’s racial interpretation of the nation,<sup>16</sup> with its imagined unity and Burkean reverence for tradition, as well as his supposition that it is “natural” to want to be with one’s “own kind” and protect home territory from the incursions of strangers, have found a home in the range of national papers’.<sup>17</sup>

Since the late 1980s religion has taken on a new mode of signification within the discourse of the New Right, in asserting that religious beliefs and practices, particularly Islamic belief and practices, are inherently different from Christian and secular practices, therefore making it unlikely that the increasing numbers of Muslims immigrating to Britain will successfully assimilate to British culture.<sup>18</sup> In what follows I shall focus on the New Right’s ‘common sense’ political language and the ways it has politely been used in the past twenty years to essentialise Muslims in Britain as a threat to the British way of life. Critiques of the New Right’s portrayal of Muslims in Britain, which can be loosely categorised in two main bodies of thought, namely the liberalism of multiculturalism and the anti-racism of the Left, will also be introduced.

### *Muslims in Britain*

The ‘Muslim community in Britain’ is a blanket term that has increasingly been used in politically driven campaigns to promote, on the one hand, fear and hostility towards Muslims who are a supposed threat to the essential values of Western civilisation and, on the other hand, to promote solidarity amongst Muslims in order to defend themselves from religious discrimination and gain public recognition of communal and religious exigencies. This includes, for example, the acknowledgment of faith-based schools, the recognition of religious holidays, the allowance for observance of prayers and dietary requirements. Before sifting through the various conceptions and misconceptions that have been projected on and by Muslim people, let us briefly consider what lies behind the ‘Muslim’ label.

As a result of the Census (Amendment) Act 2000 the 2001 census results included data on religious subgroups. It was the first time since 1851 that a question on religion was asked on a British census. According to the British Office of National Statistics, Islam is the second largest faith, after Christianity, with nearly 3 percent, or 1.6 million of the population in the United Kingdom, describing their religion as Muslim. 3.1 percent of the population stated their religion as Muslim in England.<sup>19</sup> According to Peach’s estimates, ‘the probable Muslim population in Britain in 1951 was about 23,000. By 1961, there were about 82,000 Muslims in Britain, by 1971 about 369,000, by 1981 about 553,000 and by 1991 about 1 million’.<sup>20</sup> The *Muslim News* analy-

ses the statistics by breaking them down by the country of origin: 'Of the total Muslim pop, 1.2 million are of South Asian origin. Of these, 675,000 are Pakistani, 257,000 are Bangladeshi and 160,000 of Indian origin. There are 150,000 Turks, 350,000 Arab & African. The rest are other ethnic backgrounds. 10,000 are either white converts or of Afro-Caribbean origin.'<sup>21</sup>

The first Muslims to settle in Britain were a small number of Yemeni Arabs, Somalis and Indian seaman, who worked mainly in Liverpool, London, Cardiff and Tyneside during the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> The first recorded mosque in Britain dates back to 1860 in Cardiff; and the first purpose-built mosques were constructed in Woking in 1889 and Liverpool in 1891.<sup>23</sup> The need for labourers after the Second World War led to the biggest influx of Muslim immigrants (and eventually their families) coming from mostly rural backgrounds in the Indian subcontinent. During the 1960s and 1970s a number of South Asian Muslims, from mostly urban and professional backgrounds, arrived in Britain after being expelled from East Africa. The remaining immigrants and refugees from Muslim backgrounds, as listed above, mainly arrived from 1970 onwards. By 1985 there were 338 mosques registered in Britain and an estimated 1,000 by 1997.<sup>24</sup>

The migration patterns and birth rates of these various groupings of people have distinctive experiences that must be analysed in their historical specificity. The circumstances for leaving a country (recruited for labour, political strife, conflict and war); the places and experiences they encountered before reaching Britain; the changing legal, social-economic and political frameworks and barriers they face in Britain; and the transformations of the 'home' country are all conditions which need to be explored. It is also imperative to analyse the positioning and the changing dynamics of the groupings in terms of class, religion, gender, education and generation in relation to the other members of the group, other minority groupings and the dominant culture. Most of the research on Muslims in Britain has focused on those originating from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. It cannot be assumed, due to demographic differences and the profound diversity of Muslims in Britain, that the results of these studies represent other ethnic and national groups such as Iranians and Iraqis.

In many discourses, however, religion has become the overriding marker of identity, which is problematic not only because of the historical specificity of different minority groups' situations, but also the profound variations in their religious identification and practice. As Vertovec and Peach point out:

Both images of Islam and Muslim people do gross injustice to the broad historical and geographical plasticity and creativity of Islamic writings, social forms, institutions and practices as found in numerous 'schools' of Islamic law, mystical brotherhoods, devotional and popular traditions, minority Muslim traditions (such as *Ismaili*, as well as *Ahmadiyyas* and *alevis* who are often not accepted by the 'mainstream' Muslim population), and regional variations of teachings and practices (even in countries of limited size). Such images also mask contemporary variations in the manifestations of Islamic belief and practice throughout the world which reflect the nature of any local rural-continuum, class and status structures and levels of education, both religious and secular.<sup>25</sup>

A number of national and international events in the late twentieth century, including the Iranian revolution, the Salman Rushdie affair, the Gulf war, and issues surrounding halal meat, dress and other Muslim requirements have led to many questions on the accommodation of Islam in British society. Many more queries on Islam's place in the West have been raised after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C.

Discussions surrounding Islam in the West have been problematised by essentialist images of Muslim leaders and practices which often underemphasise the range of discourses and practices of those from Muslim backgrounds. Portions of the media have been influenced by comments made by conservative political figures such as Winston Churchill MP, Ray Honeyford, Jean-Marie Le Pen and Franz Shönhuber, who conflated religion with culture, and considered it to be natural or authentic, and therefore 'different' from British culture.<sup>26</sup> Samuel Huntington's (1993) much discussed representation of Islam as a civilisational enemy to Europe (which is mirrored by anti-Western rhetoric of many Muslim militants) has become part of the 'common sense' language and cultural stereotyping reinforced and reproduced by commentators of the New Right and segments of the media.<sup>27</sup>

Poole's study on media representations of British Muslims demonstrates how stories are differentially shaped in an assortment of newspapers in relation to political circumstances and motivations. She writes:

The absence of normal stories in which Muslims appear, and the narrow diversity of roles that result from the selection of stories seen as specifically dealing with 'Muslim affairs', results in a consistently narrow framework of representation. This firmly established itself in the 1990s, but stemmed from events in the late 1980s (the Rushdie and Honeyford affairs) that defined 'what it meant to be Muslim' and that attempted to construct a closure around these definitions.<sup>28</sup>

Poole's study made the important point that the media should not always be criticised for misrepresentation and demonstrated how British newspapers do not only project negative images of Muslims in Britain. She argued that there is a need, however, for better descriptions in news stories which represent the rich variety of Muslim life, including that of the non-practising Muslims.

The rise of Islam as a prominent marker on the world stage and culturalist notions of Islam have encouraged Muslim organisations and political commentators to join together to form British Islamic institutions in order to cater to religious and social needs and respond to the rise of 'Islamophobia'.<sup>29</sup> The enormous controversy over the Salman Rushdie affair revealed many of the tensions and transformations which developed during this period. On the one hand it can be argued that the anti-blasphemy campaign and Khomeini's death sentence against Salman Rushdie damaged Muslim space in the public sphere and led to further anti-Islamic sentiment. On the other hand, the episode was central in developing a culture of action and legal struggle for rights among some British Muslims. Vertovec writes:

It is possible to interpret the rise of Islamophobia in Britain alongside advances in Muslim recognition through a kind of linked or circular operation. In one process, as a result of the increased vilification of Islam in the media and discrimination against Muslims in everyday spheres (both fuelled by assumed connections between British Muslims and international Islamic extremists), a variety of countermeasures – including changes to legislation, various institutional guidelines, and public policy adjustments – have been advocated by Muslims groups, Muslim media, and public bodies composed of Muslims and concerned others such as interfaith groups and antiracists.<sup>30</sup>

Such tensions and countermeasures will continue to materialise as a result of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks.

### *Multiculturalism and a New Politics of Representation*

In response to the increasing levels of prejudice towards Muslims (and others) in Britain, multiculturalist and anti-racist discourses have become focused on questions surrounding cultural–religious difference. Should, for example, marginalised groups be handled within the normal parameters of the political system or should special institutional arrangements be engineered to make up for exclusion and discrimination? Discussions regarding the analysis of cultural difference have developed alongside debates revolving around critiques of oriental and colonial studies – the most notable being Edward Said's, who argued that the Orientalist paradigm in the social sciences constructs the Orient as stagnant, irrational and backward, and in contrast accounts the Occident as changeful, rational and progressive.<sup>31</sup> In short, Said's critique, through a Foucauldian perspective on discourse and power, argues that Orientalism is a discourse of domination constructed by Europeans who define and control the Orient (and the Third World in general) and thereby silence and suppress the voices of oppressed groups. Said's critique triggered a crisis in some social scientific disciplines by raising questions about difference, representation, interpretation and the analysis of power in the construction of the 'Other'. The ethnic school came under attack for displaying ethnocentric tendencies in the representation of ethnic groups resulting in the propagation of their marginal positions. Whereas the emergence of post-Oriental scholarship has usefully challenged the authority of 'expert' accounts and has instigated a more context-dependent, sensitive, approach to studying society, there has been a tendency of privileging 'cultural difference' as the primary indicator of an ethnic minority group.

Post-Oriental scholarship has, for example, lent credibility to the multiculturalist problematic: that of preserving difference and recognising and facilitating cultural diversity.<sup>32</sup> Such differentialists demand that religious communities, with their own unique traditions and rules, be publicly recognised in the public sphere. The emergence of the politics of religion and community amongst Muslims in Britain has involved organisation, articulation and the construction of frameworks created by multiculturalist and community leaders, who selectively draw upon criteria in order to engineer

an identity of a commonly shared religion and community.<sup>33</sup> This is tricky, however, because in order to establish special group rights to balance out historically produced conditions of discrimination, there is a tendency to prioritise and fix certain identity markers, which do not take into account the variety and/or (re)emergence of other telling identity markers and how they shift across time and place. For example, in the pursuit of safeguarding Islamic practices in Britain, multiculturalist and Muslim community leaders have sought self-consciously to define Islam as an ethnic group in order to generate a greater response from English courts. Jorgen Nielson observes: ‘The pressure imposed on Muslim organisations by European official, legal, political and bureaucratic expectation, is such that Islam has to become an ethnic identity.’<sup>34</sup> Conflating religion and ethnicity in this way, however, makes it difficult to account for the diverse ethnic composition of Muslims in Britain and the various ways in which religious beliefs and practices are shaped and negotiated in and between different groupings. According to Yuval-Davis: ‘The liberal construction of group voice can inadvertently collude with authoritarian fundamentalist leaders who claim to represent the true “essence” of their collectivity’s culture and religion.’<sup>35</sup>

The liberal communitarians (and the New Right) have been criticised from the Left for ignoring questions of power relations and failing to recognise the dynamic character of culture, ethnic and racialised identities. It is often observed that liberals concentrate more on keeping the migrants living in their insulated communities, specified as ‘traditional’, instead of campaigning against exclusion and for political rights.<sup>36</sup> As Werbner points out, ‘cultural difference has become the basis for an exaggeration of difference and, with it, the incommensurability of cultures. Racist differentialism and liberal or social communitarianism – ideologies of the Right and Left – abandon universalist notions of responsibility, of the individual as a life project, in order to revalorise closed cultures, roots and traditions’.<sup>37</sup>

### *Alternative Models of Cultural Pluralism*

An alternative model of cultural pluralism was developed in the late 1980s by writers such as Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall. Instead of focusing on the processes of assimilation and acculturation of ethnic groups within nation-state borders, there have been a number of new concepts, such as ‘diasporic’, ‘hybrid’ and ‘creolised’ used to discuss the movements of population and settlement across and between national boundaries. Çağlar writes that, ‘these concepts draw attention to the processes that generate an interpenetration of diverse “logics”, producing new forms of boundary crossing that allegedly destabilise or subvert the hierarchies imposed on differences. Contrary to the dualistic logic of resistance-assimilation that characterised modernisation theory, here no single mode has a necessary overall priority’.<sup>38</sup> Striving to develop non-essentialist approaches in studying other cultures, these writers aim to express the complexity of practices and cultural formations of plural identities by moving towards explorations of ‘new ethnicity’

and the culture of difference as emerging hybrid identities. This approach is invoked as a challenge to essentialism because it suggests a new vision of justice which gives primacy to difference, local knowledge and heterogeneity.

Stuart Hall has sought to detach ‘ethnicity’ from essentialist discourses of ‘race’, ‘culture’ and ‘nation’, and constructs a more positive conception of ethnicity. What he had in mind was a new politics of expressive cultures of Britain’s black settlers, projected through film, popular music, dance and other cultural forms.<sup>39</sup> Gilroy, also by turning the focus away from bounded and holistic approaches to ethnic minorities, builds on Hall’s ‘celebration of difference’ in constructing a liminal third space, located on the boundary between insiders and outsiders. Those who are marginalised can make use of this vantage space to create counter-narratives that evoke and impact on the constructed boundaries and limitations of the adoptive nation.<sup>40</sup> These writers also rightly emphasise the constantly changing and contested nature of British culture and identity. According to Hall,

identity is like a bus! Not because it takes you to a fixed destination, but because you can only get somewhere—anywhere—by climbing aboard. The whole of you can never be represented by the ticket you carry, but you still have to buy a ticket to get from here to there. In the same way, you have to take a position in order to say anything, even though meaning refuses to be finally fixed and that position is an often contradictory holding operation rather than a position of truth.<sup>41</sup>

Hall’s approach, which is grounded in Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, sets out to create alliances among the margin against conservative forces by engaging in the following three-step strategy: ‘First, through an opposition to the given order; second, via recovery of broken histories and the invention of appropriate narrative forms; third, through the definition of a position and a language from which speech will continue’.<sup>42</sup> For example, Islam strategically constructed as a political force fused with ‘the British’ or ‘black people’ is thought to create a new ethnicity or hybrid identity which may link people with a diasporic culture stretching across national boundaries, and in turn challenge ethnocentric definitions of English cultural purity.

Writers such as Hall, Gilroy and Bhabha have introduced thought-provoking material which has encouraged rethinking of essentialists’ arguments. They have rightly set out to de-couple ethnicity from ‘culture’, ‘nature’ and ‘nation’, and have shifted the focus of analysis away from the processes of assimilation and acculturation within the homogenised boundaries of a nation-state, to a more inclusive and nuanced investigation of the diasporic experience. Employing the concept of hybridity, the politics of identity and the celebration of cultural–religious difference can be misrepresentative, however, should the project stem from bounded notions of pre-existing, holistic cultures. Çağlar, for instance, makes the apt point that creolisation and hybridisation could lead to bounded cultural forms, and in turn adopt the very reifications they were seeking to overcome.<sup>43</sup>

There is a danger in the politics of identity of assuming that fusing identities, such as ‘British Muslims’, will necessarily destabilise existing hierarchies.

This could also inadvertently prevent other alliances from forming which could improve the conditions of marginalised groups. As Eade writes, ‘clearly many “British Muslims” share similar economic and social problems and uniting solely around the banner of Islam can prevent them from co-operation with non-Muslims in specific struggles over such issues as gender, employment, housing, racial violence, immigration controls and the future of young black British citizens.’<sup>44</sup> Another problem with this type of approach is that it seems to focus mostly on the movements of intellectuals, artists and political activists, and assumes that everyone else in the margins is able to (and wants to) celebrate the fusion of old and new identities.

A more nuanced definition of cultural hybridity provides a way to stay clear of some of these trappings. Drawing from a distinction, made by Bakhtin, between ‘organic’ and ‘intentional’ hybridisation of languages, Pnina Werbner points out that ‘cultures may be grasped as porous, constantly changing and borrowing, while nevertheless being able to retain at any particular historical moment the capacity to shock through deliberate conflation and subversions of sanctified orderings’.<sup>45</sup> Whereas ‘organic’ hybridity conceptualises the inevitable, and often unconscious, processes of cultural exchange and transformations, ‘intended’ cultural hybridisation is more reflexive and potentially used to resist and transgress normative orders and power hierarchies. Werbner’s analysis also throws light on the fine line between the liberating possibilities in employing transgressive hybridity forms and the limits and dangers, which could overstep the boundaries of acceptability, backfire and in turn create barriers between and across cultures. She discusses these intricate processes through an examination of the debates that arose after the publication of the *Satanic Verses*.<sup>46</sup>

As the following chapters demonstrate, the efficacy of concepts such ‘hybridity’, ‘new ethnicities’ and the ‘diasporic space’ depends on how they are measured and guided by empirical research. Through specific case studies this study hopes to highlight the intersecting processes which foreground the conditions that shape cultural production and the inevitability of hybridised Iranian identities in London. It hopes to build on perspectives that question the categories and essential differences between East and West; traditional and modern; popular forms of religiosity and textual; Muslim and British; assimilation and resistance.<sup>47</sup>

Theories asserting such putative levels of difference, however, continue to be drawn upon to explain the prominence of ‘Islam’ in politics. Ernest Gellner’s cyclical theory of ‘Muslim society’, for example, argues that Islam provides an alternative route to modernity and therefore is an exception amongst the world’s civilisations because it is immune to secularisation. According to Gellner, Islam has long been split into a high tradition of urban scholars which is scriptural and characterised by order, texts and sobriety, and a low tradition which is rural, informal, and more concerned with emotion, ritual and magic. He considered such distinctions as unchanging historical categories which periodically rupture into conflict when reformers ‘revived the alleged pristine zeal of the high culture, and united tribesmen in

the interests of purification and of their own enrichment and political advancement'.<sup>48</sup> The rise of the modern state in the Muslim world, Gellner argues, is characterised by the low tradition of the tribes being replaced with a purified, high Islam.<sup>49</sup> This book will argue that positing such dichotomies as fixed and coherent sociological entities is misleading and ignores the range of Muslim beliefs and the way they are interpreted and practised according to current conditions.<sup>50</sup>

## **The Organisation of the Book**

I became particularly interested in religious practices in the early stages of this project as I listened repeatedly to Iranians from Muslim backgrounds criticise the brands of Islam propounded by the Islamic Republic and other Islamist groupings around the world (particularly in Britain). I was told time and time again that 'real' Shia Islam cannot be judged by politicised notions of Islam, nor the negative stereotypes and media images that portray Muslims as 'radical fundamentalists' and 'terrorists'. I believe that focusing on Iranians who wished to practise a religion actively, in light of the negative sentiments towards the many and different interpretations of Islam, to be an important area of research.

Many of the approaches discussed earlier have not been informed by detailed empirical studies of how religions are practised and constructed by individuals in local situations. This book moves away from the more visible religious/political projects and explores the everyday lives of Iranians living in London. Although a religion may share common symbols and a vocabulary of religious and cultural terms, it cannot be assumed that the symbols and terms are constant and, therefore, uniformly shape social experience. Instead of assuming that religious dogma, texts and symbols determine the way religions are experienced by individuals, it is my intention to build on studies that recognise varying expressions and relations of practice and representation of religions both across time and place, as well as across and between groupings.<sup>51</sup> As Asad writes, 'different kinds of practice and discourse are intrinsic to the field in which religious representation (like any representation) acquire their identity and their truthfulness. From this it does not follow that the meanings of religious practices and utterances are to be sought in social phenomena, but only that their possibility and their authoritative status are to be explained as products of historically distinctive disciplines and forces'.<sup>52</sup>

By focusing on a range of Iranian religious practices that are manifested through the Iranian women's Shia Muslim religious gatherings, Iranian Sufi orders and Iranian Christian organisations (which consist of Iranian Muslim converts) the chapters ahead will illustrate that 'Islam' cannot be discussed as fixed and rigidly bounded. An examination of the transformation of social and religious meanings found in the range of Iranian religious practices and traditions in London, whether they are considered to be heterodox or ortho-

dox, traditional or modern, Muslim or Christian, for women or for men, and so on, depends upon an understanding of the way in which they are defined and sanctioned by both the various religious and political establishments and the variegated allegiances of the practitioners. I will show how religious spaces can be vehicles and barriers to political, social and economic expression, and potentially, stepping-stones to wider public spheres.

In order to explore the very continuity, discontinuity and modifications of Iranian religious forms and beliefs in London, this study involves an inquiry carried out on two interconnected levels. Following Zubaida's approach, I examine the links between the religious networks under investigation and political discourses in Iran during the last century. This will illustrate the transformation of the religious practices in relation to socio-political processes and demonstrate that religious practices and beliefs shift, change and disappear at various historical conjunctures.<sup>53</sup> The primary focus, based on material gathered from a fieldwork study carried out from 1996 to 2000, is centred on the construction of Iranian religious networks in London, in light of the events surrounding the Iranian revolution and post-revolutionary Iran and the political and social processes in Britain. In line with writers such as Eade and Brah, this study will 'convey fully the diverse complexity of the constructional process in which individuals engage as they confront the tensions between different definitions of belonging and between social and individual identities'.<sup>54</sup> This type of research requires an examination of the interplay of religious practice and political, economic and cultural forces across and between national boundaries, which in turn marks the relationship between religious practice and gender, class, age and ethnicity.

### *Transnational Dimensions*

The social significance of the increased importance of religious traditions and practices has often been associated with coping strategies in dealing with the newness of settlement and/or a way of asserting ethnic pride, which is usually in response to social exclusion. They are often considered in terms of perspectives such as instrumentality, which is when 'religion represents a set of resources for the fulfilment of particular objectives to do with health, wealth and happiness'<sup>55</sup> and solidarity, when communal boundaries are drawn and provide a local social base for belonging and differentiation. They can not, however, be fully understood solely in the boundedness of the local London context. The following chapters will demonstrate that religious groupings are identity-building vehicles that involve negotiations with several systems of representation. Religious networks are linked to religious 'communities', both real and 'imaginary', stretching across national boundaries. As Michael Humphrey<sup>56</sup> argues, 'local identities forged in the city are interconnected to a variety of supra-local discourses on cultural identity and social membership. These can have fairly limited dimensions such as family or village community within a global context as well as broader "imagined communities" such as diaspora, national and transnational identities and histories'.

A number of the Iranian local networks that I will discuss in the upcoming chapters are created and informed within a broader context of social dialogue, articulated by my informants who travel between London, destinations in America (usually Los Angeles) and Tehran, and participate in pilgrimages to Mecca and other holy shrines. Local experience also becomes intertwined with the preservation of an invented or reinvented religious past.

These traditions are often constructed anew in order to characterise a return to a legitimate, great, pure and authentic Iranian past, with hopes of masking the negative stereotypes and images associated with ‘Muslims’ and ‘Iranians’ found in the London context. According to Hobsbawn, ‘we should expect it [the invention of tradition] to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys older social patterns or produces new ones to which they were not applicable’.<sup>57</sup>

The particular circumstances that Iranians come across in British society and the ongoing relations with networks that stretch across the wider Iranian diaspora must be analysed in light of the changing political backdrop in Iran. This book argues that the revolution, the period around the end of the Iran–Iraq war and Khomeini’s death, and Mohammed Khatami’s presidency in 1997 are particularly important historical conjunctures for understanding the choices and practices of Iranians in London and elsewhere.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Iranian Diaspora and its political and cultural dynamics. It highlights the events surrounding the Iranian revolution and post-revolutionary Iran, and the resulting waves of emigration.

Chapter 2 introduces a mapping of the range of Iranian networks in London. To my knowledge this study is the first sociological investigation of Iranians living in London. It was necessary, therefore, to gather demographic information, detect settlement patterns and to note impressions and experiences for further studies to build on.

The focus narrows in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 to the analytic objective of this study, which is to show the importance of religious traditions for some Iranians during the process of migration, and how religious practices are reworked and shaped in relation to the political and socio-economic processes in both Britain and Iran. Chapter 3 concentrates on popular Shia Muslim women’s gatherings called *sofreh*. I look at the performance of the *sofreh* gathering in the past and currently in Iran and assess its changing meanings and roles. The continuities and reinterpretations of this tradition in London are then examined.

Chapter 4 is about two Iranian Sufi orders that have developed in London since the revolution, namely, the Nimatullahi and the Maktab Tariqat Oveyssi Shahmaghsoudi. This investigation demonstrates the maintenance and reformulation of Iranian Sufi orders in London and how they serve as a social and religious base of belonging and differentiation for Iranians seeking the ‘authentic’ and ‘purest’ form of Islam. Presenting the discourses and practices of both Sufi orders will demonstrate that ‘Sufism’ does not signify or denote a set of unchanging characteristics.

Chapter 5 deals at length with Iranians from Muslim backgrounds that have rejected Islam and have converted to Born-Again Christianity and attend the Iranian Christian Fellowship located in Chiswick. Despite Christian missionary work in Iran since the nineteenth century, this is the first time a number of Iranians (living both inside and outside Iran) have become Christians. I will place this phenomenon within the wider American evangelical movement, and introduce the strategies used by the missionaries to proselytise the Iranian Muslims. It is worth stressing early on that in order to understand the many dimensions which underlie and inform these religious practices it was essential to explore the everyday lives of these Iranians outside of the religious gatherings. Let us now turn to the Iranian diaspora and the events surrounding the Iranian Revolution.

## Notes

1. This estimated figure is derived from M. Bozorgmehr (1998), p.5; see also V. Nassehi-Behnam (1990) and (2001).
2. See S. Bruce (1996), pp. 96–128; F. Halliday (1996), pp. 120–25; R. Mandel in D. Eickelman, and J. Piscatori (1990) pp. 153–74.
3. S. Bruce (1996), p. 97.
4. D. Eickelman and J. Piscatori (eds.) (1990), p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 16–17.
6. R. Wallis and S. Bruce (1989).
7. P. Bhachu (1985), V.S. Khan (1979); for criticisms see J. Eade (1994) and A. Brah (1996).
8. F. Barth (1969).
9. A. Brah (1996), p. 241.
10. See G. Bottomley (1998) and R. Miles in A. Brah (1996).
11. R. Grillo (1999), pp. 167–87.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
13. See Margaret Thatcher quoted in the *Daily Mail*, 31 January 1978; For a discussion of Powell's 1968 speeches on immigration see M. Barker (1983), pp. 1–53; see N. Murray (1994).
14. For discussions that focus on the writings of Enoch Powell, the *Salisbury Review*, and Winston Churchill MP see R. Levitas (1986), S. Verotvec and C. Peach (1997), pp. 3–11.
15. G. Seidel (1986).
16. Powell presented three speeches which laid the foundation for the new racism. On 9 February 1968, his speech was centred on a critical discussion of immigration statistics. He used an example of a case of a white girl all alone in a class of immigrants. His second speech, presented on 20 April, discussed 'the ordinary fellow-Englishman', and claimed that in 15–20 years, 'black man will have the whip hand over the white man'. Powell's third speech, given in November 1968, discussed cases of 'harassment' by blacks. The last line of the speech was as follows: 'I do not believe it is in human nature that a country such as ours, should passively watch the transformation of whole areas which lie at the heart of it into alien territory' (Powell in Smithies and Fiddick, (1969), p. 39).
17. N. Murray (1986), pp. 1–19.
18. See T. Modood in P. Werbner and T. Modood (1997).
19. See C. Peach (1992), and S. Vertovec and C. Peach (1997), pp. 8–9.
20. *Ibid.*
21. See Muslim statistics from 2001 census on <http://www.muslimnews.co.uk>
22. F. Halliday (1992).
23. A. Ahmad (1999).
24. Guardian Unlimited: Special Report  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/religion/story/0,2763,739312,00.html>

25. S. Vertovec and C. Peach (eds.) (1997), p. 8.
26. See E. Poole (2002), and S. Vertovec and C. Peach (1997), p. 8.
27. See S. Huntington (1993), pp. 22–49.
28. E. Poole (2002), p. 99.
29. See the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia (1997).
30. S. Vertovec (1997), pp. 32–33.
31. B.S. Turner (1994), p.21.
32. See C. Taylor (1994); S. Vertovec and C. Peach (1996); J. Nielsen (1992).
33. See A. Brah (1996).
34. J. Nielsen quoted in S. Vertovec and C. Peach (1997), p. 11.
35. N. Yuval-Davis in P. Werbner and T. Modood (1997), pp. 193–208.
36. G. Baumann (1996), p. 24.
37. P. Werbner in P. Werbner and T. Modood (1997), p. 17.
38. A. Çağlar in T. Modood and P. Werbner (1997), p. 172.
39. See P. Gilroy (1987); S. Hall in E. Carter et al. (1995), pp. 63–73.
40. See also H. Bhabha in E. Carter J. Donald and J. Squires (1995), pp. 3–28.
41. Ibid.
42. S. Hall quoted in N. Papastergiadis (1997), p. 275.
43. A. Çağlar, (1997), p. 72.
44. J. Eade (1994), p. 2.
45. P. Werbner (2001), p.134.
46. P. Werbner (2001), pp. 146–52.
47. D. Kandiyoti (1996), pp. 16–17. See also Soysal's writings which also stress the importance of recognising new patterns of exclusion and inclusion. She argues that universalistic discourses, entitlements of personhood and strategies are increasingly being employed by groups and in turn transforming 'national' rights and the categorical dichotomies which underlie them. Y. Soysal (1994).
48. Gellner quoted in R. Hefner in P. Heelas (1998), p. 153.
49. E. Gellner (1983) and (1992).
50. See S. Zubaida (1995).
51. For example, J. De Groot (1996); J. Eade (1995); D. Eickelman (2002); D. Eickelman and J. Piscatori, (1990); M. Fischer and M. Abedi (1990); M. Gilsenan (1990); R. Hefner (1990); Mir-Hosseini (1999); R. Tapper (1991); A. Salvatore and A. Hofert (2000); S. Zubaida (1996);
52. T. Asad (1993), p. 53.
53. See S. Zubaida (1993).
54. J. Eade (1994b), pp. 377–94.
55. S. Zubaida (1995), p. 106.
56. M. Humphrey (1999), p. 16.
57. E. Hobsbawn (1983).