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## UCL Migration Research Unit Working Papers

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### Reflections of Madina in Post-Secular Britain

The Case of the Ihsan Community in Norwich

Bernhardt Caselin





*Reflections of*

*Madina*

*in Post-Secular*

*Britain*



**The Case of the Ihsan Community in Norwich**

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This paper was submitted as a research dissertation for the  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Drawing from ethnographic research conducted among a community of Muslim converts in Norwich, UK, this paper explores the relationship between religion and modernity and critically contemplates the Islamic presence in Europe. Specifically, it enquires into the post-secular condition, the revivalist pursuit of piety and the role of religion in society. Departing from the ideas that the histories of Islam and Europe are intimately intertwined, that the continuity of religion in Western urban space is not merely an outcome of immigration and that religious transformation is a complex process within which the progressive unfolding of human capacity plays a pivotal role, this paper aims to nuance prevalent understandings of the post-secular problematic, interrogate Islam's oft-assumed incompatibility with the West and lay the groundwork for further studies into religion and modernity.

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DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER & FATHER

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

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

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## INTRODUCTION

Our societies are transforming. Besides the mere passage of time, this process is driven by the globalisation of resources, knowledge and aspirations and the interrelated migration of people into one another's cities and countries. In conjunction with this transformation a range of questions have come to the fore, at the centre of which stands the question of modernity. As Giddens (1991:3) argues, we have entered a time in which the consequences of modernity are becoming increasingly radicalised and universalised. From a political perspective, in light of the rapid diversification and deterritorialisation of citizenries, debates have flared up about state sovereignty and democratic legitimacy. From a social scientific perspective, a burgeoning field of research has emerged which enquires into changing geographies of political participation, what integration into a host society may look like or how people negotiate their identities.

In relation to these enquiries, the question of religion likewise holds a central position. What is special about modern societies is not just that they are marked by a dynamic diversity of secular and religious ways of being, but the very fact that they are still religious. In addition to contradicting Weber's (1963) secularisation thesis, this continuity of religion in the West beckons scholars to rethink the order of society and interrogate long-held assumptions, which took shape during the Enlightenment, about power, freedom and progress. One of the problems which, in my view, needs attention has to do with the way in which religious continuity in the West is usually framed, namely, as a consequence of immigration. As the West marches onwards to a secular modernity, freed from the shackles of tradition and savagery, a wave from the postcolonial hinterland floods its regions, causing distress and confusion. Such is the common, though somewhat dramatised image that comes to mind when thinking about the influx of migrants into Western space and its socio-political consequences. Islam embodies this problematic *par excellence*. Not only is Islam (as both a religion and as a body of believers) regarded as something essentially foreign to Europe, it is also held to be fundamentally at odds with modern values and aspirations.

In this paper, I want to approach the question of modernity, (post-)secularity and Islam from a different perspective. While this is conventionally placed within a migratory framework, without a reflection on what it means to take the foreignness of a Muslim for granted or depart from the assumption that religiosity in a modern context is a mere by-product of immigration, I begin from the notion that the histories of Europe and Islam are

intimately intertwined and that the continuity of religion in modern society is also due to processes inherent to modernity itself. For this project, I conducted ethnographic research among a Muslim community in Norwich, UK, the members of which are predominantly British-born converts. By enquiring into both the history and contemporary circumstance of the community, I aim to nuance our understanding of the post-secular problematic, critically contemplate the Islamic presence in a European context and lay the groundwork for further studies into the role of religion in the modern world.

In the first part, which outlines my theoretical framework and methodology, drawing on postcolonial, political and anthropological theory, I contemplate the subject of religion, modernity and the post-secular condition; approach Islam in a European context from an alternative angle; and emplace my enquiry in a discussion over religious transformation and the revivalist pursuit of piety. In the second part, I present and discuss my findings. In the first section, as viewed from the perspective of my informants, I discuss the early conversions of the community and how these conversions relate to modernity at large. Having rid the community of its essential foreignness, in the second section, I delve deeper into the contemporary reality of the community and analyse its pious aspirations and mode of revivalism. In the final section, arriving from an alternative view that takes the indigeneity of the community as its point of departure, I approach issues which typically fall within the domain of the migratory framework, such as transnationalism, otherness and inter-communal engagements. This section also raises normative questions about the order of society and Islamic revivalism. In addition, it suggests some basic elements for a different approach to understanding religious transformation throughout time, across space and in a modern context.

## PART I: THEORY & RESEARCH DESIGN

### MODERNITY, RELIGION & THE POST-SECULAR CONDITION

Gauging our present world, it is obvious that modernisation has not led to the complete privatisation of religion (Casanova 1994; Berger 1999). However, it is not the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East, nor references to God in presidential speeches which persuade me to subscribe to this observation. Refusing to reduce religion to a mere source of consolation for the destitute or read its *living* presence in violent manifestations of extremism (e.g. Habermas 2008a:17-19), I conceptualise religion along the lines of its capacity to elicit higher human qualities and assist in the articulation of a vision for society. As science in its most primordial form entails a systematic exploration of empirical reality, so religion, born of the same thirst for knowledge and attraction to beauty, begins with one's exposure to and embodiment of divine outpourings. Undoubtedly, even as a lantern can be used to set fire to a house, religion is susceptible to misuse and can be harnessed for destructive purposes. However, although there is some truth to the 'myth of religious violence' (Cavanaugh 2009), I believe that foregrounding this volatile feature is misleading and stifles our thinking.

In search of the intertwining of religion and modernity, then, instead of privileging established conflict-ridden political arenas, I want to focus on those local stirrings where the faithful aim to apply their physical, intellectual and spiritual faculties and draw from the reservoirs of knowledge available to them to contribute to the betterment of their environment and cultivate the capacity to respond to the needs of this age. We may interpret such formative stirrings in a relativist manner as the emergence of 'multiple modernities' (Hefner 1998; Eisenstadt 2002). However, taking into account that discourses and practices are inevitably implicated in one another's formation and therefore difficult to separate from the whole, I depart from the possibility that these stirrings are not constitutive of some 'alternative modern', but rather attempts to re-orient the project of modernity at large (cf. Mitchell 2000:xiii). It is with these ideas in mind, in search of capacities and creative formations, that I want to approach the continuity of religion in the modernising world.

My enquiries into this subject take place in the context of the so-called 'post-secular city' (Beaumont & Baker 2011). Admittedly, the notion of the post-secular is somewhat

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. Beaumont & Baker 2011:33; Habermas 2008a:20-21). Such thinking too easily translates into a simplistic distinction between immigrant bodies, associated with tradition and intrusion, and the host society, defined as some overarching modernised realm, vested in civic abstractions. It furthermore poses the risk of locking our enquiry into debates over the politics of multiculturalism, focused on form, without having fairly assessed the substantive features of the religious movement under study (cf. Ramadan 2004:6-7).

Instead, without underestimating the impact that the global flow of peoples, ideas, images, technologies and resources have on our cultural orientations (Appadurai 1996), I begin from the notion of what I term *spiritual susceptibility*, which I take to be inherent to the human form, and then enquire into the manners in which this capacity is awakened, tuned and mobilised in a modern context. Departing from this perspective may assist us in tapping into deeper discussions concerned with the philosophical underpinnings of our societies: the dominant values, assumptions and aspirations implicit in our understandings of modernity, religion and the notion of progress.

## REVISITING THE ISLAMIC PRESENCE IN EUROPE

Orienting our discussion towards the subject of Islam in a European context immediately brings into view a number of interrelated problems which need to be addressed. Following Levey (2009), when gauging the prevalent discourses concerned with multiculturalism and secularism, it seems that some scholars do not take issue with religion as such, but with Islam in particular (p.15). I would argue that this is not merely a response to recent outbursts of Islamic extremism, but rather the crystallisation of a certain way of conceiving of Islam: an age-old imaginary which is solidified through a politically motivated and selective mediatisation of real world events (Said 1997). The dominant narrative and the stereotypes that spring from it ground Islam as an inherently foreign entity; an archetypal Other; at odds with Western liberal values; incompatible with modernity; and embroiled in a dramatic uprising with its body of believers positioned at an intersection between fundamentalism and moderation (e.g. Huntington 1996; Juergensmeyer 2008; March 2009).

Although it is beyond the scope of this project to fully come to grips with this problem, it is worth considering the insights of a number of scholars. Göle (2012), for example, argues that Islam and Europe are conceptualised in such divergent and mutually exclusive ways that, although they share space, they appear to be located at different points in time (p.668-669). To explain this she draws on Fabian (2002) who, in his work on the production of the Other, describes in detail how the Enlightenment, colonialism and scientific ventures contrived to transform time from a sacred, cyclical and all-encompassing reality, salvaged only through conversion to Christendom, into a secular, linear and spatialised timeframe within which progress is achieved through liberating oneself from history (p.1-31). Although postcolonial migratory flows have significantly destabilised this ethnocentric geography, which sharply separated modern Man from the savages in the periphery, the common labelling of Muslims as backward or outdated confirm that Islam is still regarded as being out-of-sync with the modern mainstream (Göle 2012:670).

Following Said (1978), this ongoing antagonism originates from the pre-colonial era, during which Islamic empires posed a significant threat to Christian power structures and theological certainties (p.60). It was arguably from the late 1400s onwards, following the banishment of Muslims from the Iberian peninsula and Europeans' discovery of the New World, that Europe rose to its zenith. As a result of these events, Europe became inseparable

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 entails starting from the premise that the historical trajectories of both Europe and Islam are intimately intertwined with one another. While we need not go so far as to adopt Bulliet's (2004) notion of an 'Islam-Christian civilisation', we could at least acknowledge the tremendous effect that the early engagements of Muslim scholars with various philosophical traditions have had on Europe's intellectual life and that these interactions in turn have worked to shape Islamic thought and practice (Tolan *et al* 2013:88-89; Akhavi 2003:546-549; Salvatore 2006:545-50; Al-Sayyad & Castells 2002;).

Moving beyond the migratory framework, in a British context, furthermore entails taking into account the fact that the earliest formations of Muslim communal life in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century occurred among Victorian Britons who embraced Islam through a recognition of its validity and a rejection of the socio-religious reality in which they found themselves at the time (Gilham 2015; Geaves 2010; Shearmur 2014). Bearing this in mind opens us up to the idea that the presence of Islam in Britain, even as the post-secular condition, is not merely a matter of diasporic struggles for cultural survival, but also the outcome of a certain susceptibility which has led some to respond positively to the claims set forth in the Qur'an. It renders us receptive to the possibility that modernity itself produces its own countercultural subjectivities which, when found to resonate with certain theologies, can lead those susceptible to these resonances to embrace religion in the modern world.

## RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION & THE REVIVALIST PURSUIT OF PIETY

The process of religious transformation is a complicated subject. At a fundamental level, in contrast to the logic of social constructivists, I take it to work through the forces of revelation and divine decree. In the case of Islam, this calls for a critical examination of the assumed finality of Islam and a consideration of the idea of progressive revelation which takes the fundamental unity of religion as its point of departure (e.g. Saiedi 2008:3-7; Momen 1985, 1999). In this study, however, I am not concerned with the workings of revelation, but with human effort and intention. Instead of unravelling what Islam *is*, my interest concerns what people *do* with it and why.

I agree with Bowen (2012) that a proper understanding of transformation at this level requires us to seek a balance between Geertz (1968), who argued that Islam takes shape under the influence of culture and history, and Asad (1986), who emphasised the constitutive power of politics. The matter of finality plays a decisive role here too: it restricts our conceptual understanding of religious transformation to terms such as syncretisation, reformation and revival –ruling out the possibility of a dialectical interplay between fossilisation and maturation *across* religious dispensations. However, rather than interrogating the belief in finality from a theological perspective, here I merely take it as indicative of a certain mindset. In relation to modernity, a question then arises as to how Muslims deal with the fact that the context within which Islam operates is changing whilst believing firmly that Islamic laws and principles can be re-interpreted, but not altered by ordinary mortals (Watt 1988:6-8; Zirker 1992; cf. Calderini 2008).

Following the works of MacIntyre (1981), who deemed it vital to re-establish virtue in the modern world, and Asad (1993), who opposed the prevalent symbolic understanding of religion, in recent years a number of influential works have appeared which arguably mark an ‘ethical turn’ in the social sciences (Fassin 2014). The revivalist pursuit of piety, which is a subject central to this line of enquiry, is productive in that it enables us to gain a clearer insight into exactly how Muslims aim to recover and safeguard their religious integrity under modern conditions.

Hirschkind (2006), for example, has shown how the circulation of cassette sermons in Cairo, beyond facilitating the dissemination of knowledge, is constitutive of an educative counterpublic in which the senses are engaged to evoke a particular set of dispositions and sensibilities that make up the virtuous self. Calling into question secular notions of public

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 in Egypt. Challenging modernist notions of freedom and autonomy, their activities are geared towards internal fulfilment through a stringent exercise of external piety, referring to such acts as the rehearsal of 'correct' emotions and the meticulous performance of ritual worship. Similarly, Deeb (2006) unsettles liberal understandings of emancipation and social progress with her analysis of a group of Shi'í women in Beirut, who regard themselves as both modern *and* pious and who deem the intertwining of material innovation *and* spirituality crucial to the advancement of society.

While these studies have been received with much enthusiasm for the contributions they have made to our understanding of how moral subjectivities take shape, they have been criticised for a number of reasons. The main problem with these studies seems to be that the pathway to piety is presented as a unilinear trajectory. Becoming pious comes across as a seamless exchange of an old lifestyle for a new (or revived) one, which according to Janson (2013:12) resembles flawed Orientalist understandings of Islam's evolution as a movement from idiosyncrasy to purity. Most notable among the critics is Schielke (2009a), who argues that we must place ambivalence at the heart of our enquiry, take stock of the problems both solved *and* created by pious formation and bear in mind that the human condition is such that there are always a number of different conceptions of the 'good life' which simultaneously impinge upon processes of decision-making and behaviour (p.161-164).

Elsewhere he proposes the concept of 'moral registers' to encapsulate the multiplicity of ethical structures and move away from coherence to the daily reality of dealing with contradictions, inconsistencies and confusion (Schielke 2009b). Although I agree that we need to describe social reality as it is and accommodate for imperfections, I think that the concept of moral registers puts us at risk of succumbing to the paralysing force of relativism. Thus, instead of placing ambivalence at the centre of my enquiry, I choose to focus on potentialities. That is, although I expect to come across imperfections and contradictions, I intend to emplace such features within a larger framework of possibility and seek to build my understanding from there.



## RESEARCH DESIGN: QUESTIONS, METHODOLOGY & ANALYSIS

From February until August 2015, I conducted ethnographic research among a Muslim community affiliated with the Ihsan mosque in Norwich, Norfolk.<sup>1</sup> 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 to lay the groundwork for further enquiries into the role of religion in the modernising world.

In terms of methodology, I relied primarily on participant observation undertaken in and around the mosque. This consisted of attending talks, participating in public discussions, weekly study circles, prayer and celebrations and simply living in Norwich. In doing so, and recognising the oxymoronic nature of participant observation which simultaneously immerses *and* separates the researcher from his subjects (DeWalt & DeWalt 2011:28-29), I tried to be as critical as possible. Following Mahmood's (2005:36) notion of proper critique,

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<sup>1</sup> As my research does not deal with sensitive matters, I have not changed the name of the mosque, nor its founder. However, out of consideration for personal privacy, I have anonymised my informants by altering their names, while maintaining their ethnicity, gender and age.

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 build my understanding on the basis of emic terminologies without completely ridding myself of my own theoretical curiosities and dispositions. As a whole, my analysis consisted of four stages. I regard the first stage as being intrinsically tied to the process of gathering data, which is intuitive in nature. The analytical aspect lies in choosing who to interview, which observations to note down and which online sources to explore. I consequently regard my field notes and interview transcriptions not as 'copies of reality', but as interpretative constructions (Kvale 2007:94-96). The second stage consisted of going through my data to arrive at a broad-stroked, impressionist outline of some of the general themes which beckoned to be explored in more depth. In this regard, my research was cyclical in nature, moving back and forth between the first and second stage until I was able to clearly envision the arguments I would be able to make and reach a point of saturation (Green 2005:87).

The third stage, building up towards writing the paper, was a process of identifying core themes *across* various transcriptions and field notes and finding ways to build 'bridges' between my findings and the literature (Murchison 2010:191). I regard the actual writing up of my paper as the final stage of analysis. As argued by post-modernists such as Clifford (1986): reporting on one's findings is hardly objective. Neither ethnography, nor scientific writing for that matter, can be said to transcend history and language. Rather, it is complicit, inventive, value-laden, productive of meaning and therefore inevitably biased at the core (p.1-4). This is part of the reason why I have chosen to write in a somewhat personalised and reflexive manner, however limited such reflexivity may be (Rose 1997). Ultimately, following the approach of Smith (1991), I have aimed to produce an honest account of the Ihsan community and articulate my contemplations in such a way that, by virtue of its critical balance between the spiritual rationale of my informants and the empiricist logic of academic scholarship, the end-result may be acceptable to both the Ihsan community and the scientific community at large.

## PART II: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

### EARLY STIRRINGS: “LONDON IS MECCA, NORWICH IS MADINA”

Like most cities in contemporary Britain, Norwich has become a site of burgeoning multiculturalism. I agree with Parekh's Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain (2000) that this is not due to some 'concerted decision' (p.14), but rather the result of an 'unplanned, incremental process' (Watson & Saha 2013:2019). However, in contrast to conventional theory, I posit that immigration and globalisation are not the sole forces driving this transformation, especially when it comes to its religious dimensions. Amidst the medieval castles, churches and crumbling city walls of Norwich, a community of predominantly 'native' British Muslims has flowered into existence whose story testifies to this argument. While the outward forms, referring to their adopted Muslim names and Oriental habits, may draw one's attention at first, it is at the level of self-understanding and sense of purpose that one finds the most significant alterations of identity. In order to understand this, we must return to the '60s and '70s.

One of the most significant historical events which transpired during this time-period is undoubtedly the Islamic Revolution in Iran. This dramatic 'return' to religion as a politically significant frame of reference, which has had a tremendous impact on secularisation theory, seemed to echo experiences throughout the decolonising world, where the correlation between secularisation and development did not make sense (Jakobsen & Pellegrini 2008:9-10). Yet, lest we mistakenly reduce these processes to a mere postcolonial phenomenon, let us recall that the '60s and '70s likewise marked a rise in a variety of spiritual movements throughout the Western world. We need only think of The Beatles' turn to Hinduism or Cat Stevens' conversion to Islam. Although there is no precise beginning or sole initiator to these countercultural stirrings, it is clear that during this time there was a remarkable upsurge of communal movements dedicated to radical political activism, mystical and psychedelic pursuits, sexual experimentation, self-sufficient living and artistic fusions with the other-worldly (Fairfield & Miller 2010:12; also see Nye 2001). It is within this historical context that we need to place the birth of the Ihsan community.

“It was an intense politically, spiritually, psychologically interesting time!... There was utter disillusion! Complete total rejection!” Hajj Aziza, an English lady who converted

to Islam in 1969, told me.<sup>2</sup> “People began to smell hypocrisy, oppression and deceit...it was a huge rejection of many values and attitudes...people wanted to get back to a pure place... Diagnostically, this is where Shaykh Abdu’l-Qadr had his finger on the button...like a tumour...it was the financial system! That’s the core, the ground thing that started it.” The Shaykh she referred to is an 84-year-old Scotsman, formerly known as Ian Dallas. He became a Muslim during one of his travels to Morocco in 1967, founded the Murabitun World Movement,<sup>3</sup> has since established mosques in Norwich, Granada and Cape Town and is estimated to lead around 10,000 followers residing in England, Spain, Malaysia, Germany, Nigeria, Australia, Switzerland, South Africa, Mexico and Denmark (El Kobaiti Idrissi 2013:74-76; Pérez Ventura 2012; Henderson 2010).

“I needed a path,” Aziza said. After months of uncertainty and soul-searching in Southern Spain, she felt an inner prompting to return to London, where she had been an active feminist for some years. Upon entering the living room of her mentor, she met the Shaykh who, after hearing of her turmoil, told her to wash her face, hands and lower arms, direct herself towards the east and bow in submission. He assured her that the rest would follow. “Amazing...” she sighed. “He didn’t mention the word Islam at all. From then on...we were his toddlers really, spiritually speaking. It was then still a group of about twenty and we got a squat in London...There he taught us how to eat properly, speak properly and behave properly.”

In trying to understand how and why this small community made its way from London to Norwich, another informant told me that the pressures in London from other diasporic Muslim communities had been too great as they vehemently opposed the idea of ‘converts’ running a mosque of their own. “I often say: London is Mecca. Norwich is Madina... Mecca was the place where like it was bigger, the powerful place, where the Prophet was raised and he kind of wanted to challenge it, but it became impossible...the things before were more like exhortations or calls to live in a particular way, but in Madina it became possible to actually do it.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Interview, Hajj Aziza, 30-06-2015

<sup>3</sup> This movement centres its efforts on the restoration of the ‘fallen pillar’ of *zakat* (an obligatory form of tax or alms-giving), the law of which prescribes that 1) it must be taken by an *Amir* (commander of the community); 2) it must consist of gold or silver, and not paper-money; and 3) it must be disbursed at once, instead of being saved in investment funds. According to the movement’s leaders, it is nearly impossible to observe *zakat* in the world’s current financial structure, which by implication inhibits Islam proper to be manifested in the contemporary world. See: Abdu’l-Haqq, B. and A. Abdu’l-Hakim (2001) *Zakat: Raising a Fallen Pillar* (UK: Black Stone Press).

<sup>4</sup> Interview, James, 25-05-2015



Figure 1: Photograph of some of the earliest male members of the Ihsan. Displayed in the mosque, 22-03-2015.

Between the departure from London and the eventual arrival in Norwich, a movement which Aziza likewise compared to the Prophet's *hijra* (migration) from Mecca to Madina, the community, by then about 150 strong, resided in the countryside some twelve miles out of Norwich for a number of years. Living together in a large mansion and surrounding tents, their goal was to "...lay the foundation for a Muslim civilisation." "We failed," said Hajj Abdu'llah, an Irishman who converted to Islam in 1973 and now serves as Imam to the Ihsan community. "We really thought we would take this to everybody. [We] thought it would take five years. Done. Because it was so obvious to us... We had to learn that things were not going to go that quickly."<sup>5</sup>

Just like in Aziza's case, Abdu'llah's conversion was motivated by an utter rejection of what he understood to be modernity. Regarding the '70s, he said that "...some sort of fracture happened. A lot of young people were wondering...is this really the way I want to live?" Disconcerted by a life that revolved around material ambitions and individualism, his 'awakening' took place after having been invited by the Shaykh to meet the community. "They were different...people's faces were different...there was a note that was true, or real..." He went on to say that "there is a kind of scientific, secular, humanist stance that you can

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<sup>5</sup> Interview, Hajj Abdu'llah, 28-06-2015

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. “This 'society' cannot survive!” Aziza stated emphatically. “It kills everything in its path... Islam returns one to the original teachings. Like the Native Americans and Indigenous people... They all had this rootedness in the natural world... Islam is just the last version of all of that... It is to submit to reality, to the organic natural real world which Allah created and you put your head on it, because that's where you are!”<sup>6</sup> What stands out to me is not so much her critique of modern society but the link she places between the organic, natural and indigenous ways of life and Islam as a means through which authenticity can best be achieved. Her rationale behind turning to Islam and the case she makes for its societal relevance differ markedly from common multiculturalist arguments, which are grounded in concerns over cultural survival, recognition and autonomy (Taylor 1994).

In 1977 the community eventually abandoned the countryside and moved into Norwich city centre, where they were able to purchase an old chapel and designate it as their mosque. In this endeavour, they were assisted by an Egyptian businessman who had reportedly been so moved by the community that he put a portion of his inheritance at their disposal, requesting that they would name the mosque after his mother –Ihsan.<sup>7</sup> According to Abdu'llah, this dispersal into Norwich ought to be interpreted as a “tactical retreat, rather than a defeat.”<sup>8</sup> Seclusion no longer seemed effective. Instead, there was a growing understanding that modernity could not simply be avoided, but that the community needed to learn how to establish its desired pattern of community life within the structures of society. I will discuss the implications of this realisation in the next section.

What strikes me when assessing these early stirrings is the difference between the conversions of the Victorian Britons that I referred to earlier and those of my informants. Whereas the Victorians were primarily motivated by theological considerations, a fascination with the Orient and a deep resentment of British imperialism (Geaves 2010), my

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<sup>6</sup> Interview, Hajj Aziza, 30-06-2015

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.muslimsofnorwich.org.uk/about-us/> [03-07-2015]

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Hajj Abdu'llah, 28-06-2015

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 instead depart from the ideals of the early philosophers who envisioned modernity as entailing the liberation of the human mind so people may come to think freely (Browning *et al* 2000:166), the eradication of prejudice, slavery and elitism (Porter 2001:3) and the appropriation of science as a source of human welfare (Heller 1999), then we may ask ourselves –when fairly gauging the present condition– whether or not there even is such a thing as modernity for Islam to be at odds with.

“A false paradise.” That is how James, a relatively new member of the Ihsan community, described the modern world to me.<sup>9</sup> Throughout my fieldwork, it became apparent that this sense of falseness he addressed constitutes the central feature of modern life from which the Ihsan community seeks to liberate itself. In fact, already during one of my first visits to the mosque to attend a public discussion about freedom this became apparent to me as I was drawn to a poster which read: “None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free –von Goethe.”<sup>10</sup>

This falseness, which carries meanings such as untruth, deception and treachery, refers to a range of different aspects: liberal democracy and the false notion of freedom; the contemporary educational system and the false notion of knowledge; the culture of consumerism and the false notion of choice; atheism and the false notion of the ‘good life’; the nation-state and the false notion of community; and the modern banking system and the false notion of wealth. The main implication of this perception, which in my understanding constitutes a general position held by members of the Ihsan community, is that modernity in its current form does not enable humanity to manifest the authentic form of the human being. This is a crucial point which I explore in the next section.

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In this section, I have sought to demonstrate that the movement towards Islam by the early members of the Ihsan community ought to be interpreted as a process that has taken shape

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<sup>9</sup> Interview, James, 25-05-2015

<sup>10</sup> Public discussion, 22-03-2015

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.

## TRUE REVIVALISM & THE AUTHENTIC HUMAN FORM

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!”<sup>11</sup> 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’.<sup>12</sup> 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

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<sup>11</sup> Interview, Hajj Sadiq, 04-05-2015

<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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

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<sup>13</sup> 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 central to enhancing the nurturing power of being 'in the company of others', is to collectively raise the quality of *conversations*, which –when practiced properly– are likened to 'meadows of the garden'<sup>14</sup>. Every week, under the guidance of Hajj Hamza, study circles are held, the goal of which is to engage in productive conversations and enable its participants to become eloquent: precise in their use of language, confident in their expressions and persuasive in their arguments. Beyond developing these skills, the aim is furthermore to raise an awareness of prevalent discourses about Islam and modern society in order to transcend the superficial narratives to which these discourses subscribe and thereby "...recover the pleasures and benefits of civilised conversation."<sup>15</sup>

Both the endeavour to enhance the quality of conversations and the dialogical style of the study circles fit within a larger effort to develop a sound educational system. This effort springs from a serious concern over one of the deficits of modernity, which is referred to as 'technological thinking'. According to my informants, this style of thought has not only laid waste to politics, the private sector and contemporary education, due to its economic reductionism and formulaic approach to practice, but it also puts Muslim communities at risk. In fact, referring to the Saudi mosque and the Arabian Peninsula at large, Abdu'llah stated that their problem is that they have blindly walked into modernity and consequently succumbed to its mode of thought. He went on to remind me that modernity is by no means devoid of spirit and meaning. On the contrary, "it has its own spirit. That's the frightening

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<sup>14</sup> The garden refers to paradise, study circle, 11-05-2015

<sup>15</sup> Study circle, Hajj Hamza, 28-05-2015

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.”<sup>16</sup>

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!”<sup>17</sup> In order to articulate a policy on how education ought to take shape within the community, the Muslim Faculty of Advanced Studies has engaged in a number of explorative discussions on knowledge and true education. Ironically, one of the directions in which the Faculty has simultaneously been moving is towards the establishment of a formal curriculum, intended to provide the study circles with more structure, at the end of which students will be formally assessed and awarded a degree.<sup>18</sup>

Another effort, which traces along the greater-communal line of action and brings to light the politico-intellectual nature of the process of pious formation, has to do with the financial structures of the modern world. During one of my interviews with Sadiq, he handed me a genuine silver Dirham, pointing out that this may be the first time for me to encounter real money. After stating that the Ihsan mosque was the first place in centuries where silver Dirhams and gold Dinars were minted again, he went on to explain that the current banking system, which is built around paper-money and mere digits on a screen, is one of the biggest falsities of our time: a facilitator of enslavement and due to its rootedness in usury (*reba*) simply incompatible with the precepts of Islam (see note 3). Although its re-introduction in the Islamic world is a painstakingly slow process, these coins can already be used within any of the communities affiliated with Shaykh Abdu’l-Qadr and due to a concerted effort even in some regions of Malaysia (Hookway 2010). Overthrowing the general banking system is by no means on the agenda. Instead, as I understand it from my conversations with Sadiq, this effort aims to enable the community to acquire, protect and disseminate *true wealth*, whilst anticipating that the modern structure, because of its reliance on valueless money and systemic debt, cannot but self-destruct in due time.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview, Abdu’llah, 28-06-2015

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Sadiq, 4-05-2015

<sup>18</sup> Study circle, Hamza, 28-05-2015



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."<sup>19</sup> 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

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<sup>19</sup> Interview, James, 25-05-2015

sanity,”<sup>20</sup> a safe-space until Judgement Day when the entire world shall be filled with justice.<sup>21</sup>

Hajj Umar, one of the earlier members of the community, did not feel much for the ‘island metaphor’. He suggested, instead, to liken it to a band of soldiers who, because of the dire situation in which they find themselves, are forced to draw back and return to the source –a situation within which urgency rather than strategy governs one’s actions.<sup>22</sup> Although this hearkening back to an idealised past corresponds to the logic of other revivalist communities, such as the salafi, I would argue that the Ihsan community is different in the sense that their revivalism constitutes a two-pronged response: in the first instance, the community aims to distance itself from the falsities of modernity; in the second, it rejects the rigid approach of other revivalist groups which, by virtue of their emphasis on technique, are regarded as mere products of the very phenomenon from which they seek to recover.

Ultimately, these efforts are to enable a sound community life within which the individual may prosper and achieve his authentic form. As a counter-image of all that is deemed false, and imagining along the described lines of pious formation, a vision of this authentic human form then emerges. The pious subject is no less than a truly free human being who moves by the Will of God, reflects divine virtues, is capable of imbibing the (Arabic) Word of God, inhabits the world in harmony with its natural surroundings, is capable of acquiring true wealth purified through acts of charity, converses with others in an eloquent manner, is clothed with the robe of true knowledge, and recognises one’s own progress to be intimately tied to the progress of one’s community.

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In this section, I argued that in contrast to other revivalist communities, the process of pious formation in which the Ihsan community is engaged is primarily of a politico-intellectual nature, tracing along two lines of action. While personal striving is important, the main line of action entails a collective endeavour. Whereas the personal trajectory aims towards the acquisition of a goodly character, the collective efforts target structure and centre around

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<sup>20</sup> Interview, Sadiq, 04-05-2015

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Sadiq, 10-05-2015

<sup>22</sup> Informal interview, Hajj Umar, 13-06-2015



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 the modern world. In my estimation, the picture of the authentic human form which undergirds these revivalist formations is appealing and may serve to ameliorate our understanding of the role of religion in the modern world. However, in the next section I raise a number of critical issues which necessitate a fair-minded consideration. Apart from contributing to our understanding of religious transformation and the post-secular condition, the goal is to lay the groundwork for further enquiries into the matter of religion in modern society.

## RAISING THE MULTI-ETHNIC ARCHIPELAGO & THE PROBLEM OF OTHERNESS

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.<sup>23</sup> 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 the confines of the metaphorical island of Madina.

One of the reasons is that the Ihsan is primarily of a transnational nature. This is not only evident from its political structure (the Shaykh currently leads the community from Cape Town), but also from its educational geography. During the first weeks of my research, Hamza's study circles had been widely attended by a number of adolescent Muslim girls from Italy and Spain. As one of my informants explained, these students had come from an Islamic school for girls, founded in Morocco by a member of the Ihsan. As part of the curriculum, each year some of its students come to Norwich for a period of three months. The idea is that, for a time, they leave the protective space of their families to be immersed in the wider embrace of the community, deepen their knowledge of the Qur'an, learn Arabic and English, and better understand the rational grounds for their convictions.<sup>24</sup>

Notwithstanding typical objections voiced from the perspective of the nation-state, the sovereignty of which is grounded in boundedness and a conflation of identity with space (Tölölyan 2008:232; Vásquez & Marquardt 2008:315-316; Bash *et al* 2008:263), I do not regard this transnational modality problematic as such. In fact, I conceive transnationalism to be conducive to human flourishing and an opportunity to reconfigure minority-majority relations (Asad 2003:180). What strikes me, however, is that despite its transnational form, which is characterised by cross-border interactions, the community is somewhat inward oriented. At first glance, it may not seem as such. Indeed, the Ihsan mosque is open to

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<sup>23</sup> Some of my informants have told me about certain problems within the community, referring to patriarchal tendencies and coining terms such as 'false piety' (also see El Kobaiti Idrissi 2013:75-76; Hermansen 2005:487-490). However, dwelling on these private issues, which are of a sensitive nature and have more to do with the spiritual immaturity of individuals, would detract from our purpose to understand the community's endeavours in relation to modernity. It suffices to say that no individual can make claims to perfection and that piety is a process of approximation, rather than a state of completion.

<sup>24</sup> Informal interview, Mounia, 04-05-2015

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.<sup>25</sup> 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.<sup>26</sup> 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 encounters with members of the wider public within its spatiality provides a basis for a powerful counter-argument against recent condemnations of multiculturalism (see Neal *et al* 2013). Surely, the mere fact that these discussions take place is suggestive of the *possibility* to move beyond the level of polemics and apologetics, inter-faith dialogue and civic engagement, towards an endeavour to cultivate an inter-communal capacity to identify and respond to the needs of society. However, based on my brief experience, I maintain that these public discussions at present are still more about affirming Islam as panacea and disarming Islamophobic narratives, rather than clearing the space to collectively think through the problems facing the city, society and humanity at large. To sum up, one of the reasons why it is difficult to emplace this community in the city is that its self-understanding as 'an island of sanity' –or, more precisely, an archipelago in transnational space– effectively works to disembed it from its locality as a potential site for inter-communal learning (cf. Brickell & Datta 2011:3-4; also see Salih 2004:1007-1008).

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<sup>25</sup> Although a number of my informants claimed that von Goethe eventually converted to Islam.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, Sadiq, 04-05-2015

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."<sup>27</sup>

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* (2006) that we ought to be aware that the force of Orientalism, or the production of otherness in general, does not merely operate within larger discourses, but also achieves its reality in everyday language and practices. Upon reflection, it is almost as if the Ihsan community, through its rehearsal of the Orient, aims to attain a kind of romantic migrant identity: a band of foreigners, free from the constraints of the lands in which they dwell, respectful to all, but with deep allegiances elsewhere.

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<sup>27</sup> Interview, Sadiq, 04-05-2015



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*.<sup>28</sup> After the melodious recitation of *dhikr* (a devotional form), which had been loudly performed by more than fifty believers in the middle of Chapelfield park, adjacent to the mosque, as I gazed on the multitude it became clear to me that at such gatherings, which attract Muslims from a range of different ethnic backgrounds from all over England, it is in fact the Arabic names, Oriental attire and those gestures and practices associated with Middle Eastern culture, which constitute the common thread and imbue the gathering with a sense of oneness. As I indicated earlier, it is precisely this strong sense of togetherness which draws seekers into the Ihsan’s fold. As Amadou, one of the Nigerian believers, recounted:

“I was living in London previously and I would always see different communities together, you know, Bangladeshi’s, Pakistani’s, or even from my own parents, the Nigerian community. I would go to the mosque and everyone would say come! You don’t pray! You don’t listen! But I couldn’t understand Yoruba, so I would just sit there. But then, coming to Norwich and seeing, well, it was a small part of a bigger

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<sup>28</sup> Celebration marking the breaking of the fast, 18-07-2015.

community, but very diverse. It had everything, every culture, and you know, that's Allah, everything under one roof."<sup>29</sup>

Although religions are often charged with imposing closure and parochialism (Glick Schiller *et al* 2011:399), they can also contribute to the cultivation of a global consciousness and enable the imagination of wider communities (Robertson 1992:283). Especially during celebratory events such as *Eid*, the Ihsan's capacity for the latter is manifest. However, notwithstanding its easy accommodation of ethnic multiplicity and the porosity of its urban presence when engaged in public worship, the Ihsan's distinctiveness remains intact and its external border, separating it from wider society and enacted through its self-orientalising practices, is maintained.

In no way should these observations be taken as a critique of the Ihsan community *an sich*. The manners in which they seek to safeguard their integrity and build community under modern conditions merits recognition, especially in light of other revivalist movements who have taken recourse to violence. Yet, even after having encountered a benign revivalist community such as the Ihsan, I remain doubtful about whether Islam permits its adherents a sufficient degree of theological and judicial agility to reach *beyond* the modern, overcome the problem of otherness and articulate a vision that is truly and unreservedly world-embracing.

As can be inferred from its aspiration to revive the reality of Madina and the concomitant deferral of addressing global justice to a distant Day of Judgement, the Ihsan community remains –even as any revivalist movement– deeply locked within the structures of modernity. Certainly, its appropriation of modern technology is indicative of the community's capacity to critically adapt to modernity. Such appropriation facilitates the dissemination of knowledge (Eickelman & Anderson 1997) and enables charismatic leaders such as Shaykh Abdu'l-Qadr to thrive within a 'fragmenting religious field' (Duschinsky 2012:23; Turner 2013:45). However, at the level of principles and values the Ihsan nonetheless remains caught up in a (false) choice between traditionalism and modernism. The fundamental issue, as I already alluded to in the section on religious transformation, is in my view the unquestioned, yet problematic notion of finality in Islam, which rules out any

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<sup>29</sup> Study circle, Amadou, 11-05-2015

possibility for religious transformation beyond mere syncretisation, reformation and revival.<sup>30</sup>

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.

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<sup>30</sup> See Khan (2015) for a critical and theologically grounded consideration of finality in Islam.



## CONCLUSION

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 domain. At the level of structure, it is clear that the Ihsan thrives under modern conditions, while in terms of its capacity to articulate a clear vision of social justice for the world beyond its confines, its revivalist aspirations and self-understanding as an island indicate an inability to transcend the choice between traditionalism and modernism – a dichotomy which traces its roots to the Enlightenment.

This problem is perhaps to be attributed to the notion of finality in Islam. In the case of the Ihsan, this unquestioned assumption leaves them to aspire unto the revival of Madina, whereas other communities may see it fit to reinterpret their scriptures so as to approximate alternative notions of the 'good life'. In either case, however, modernity remains a dominant force, determining the contours within which Muslims may imagine the future. It is for this reason that I suggest we re-examine religion in its various forms as a source of progress, which unfolds in space and time and *across* dispensations and draws on an ever-evolving set of capacities. In order for us to do so, I believe we need to continue contemplating the modern; bring into view the specific capacities which are coming into reach; critically articulate the needs of this age; cast our net widely to include a much greater variety of religious communities into our analyses; and thereby seek to refine our understanding of religion's role for the future to come.

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