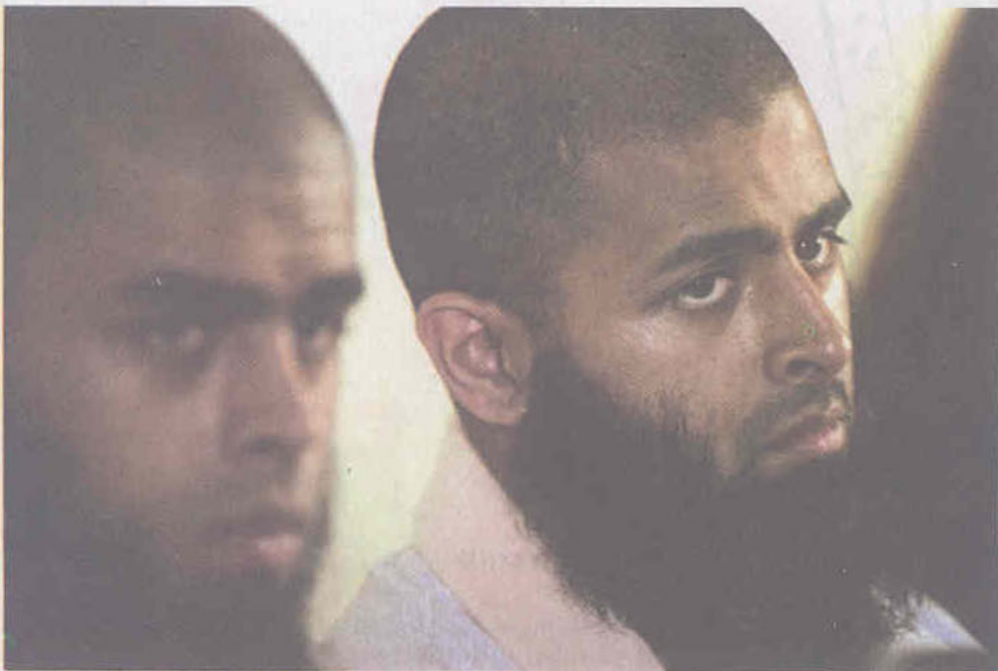


Are we just what we Eat?

British Muslims regard the sudden renewed interest in ritual slaughter with suspicion and distrust. Must the identity of Britain's largest minority religion always be reduced to beards, scarves and halal meat?

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23-year-old Mohammed Abdul Kahar, who was shot by police during an anti-terrorist raid in London said he thought he was being attacked by robbers until he was dumped on the sidewalk outside his London home and saw a police van. Police apologised for the attack, but many suspect long-running Islamophobia behind the attack.

out that, 'Islam does not limit itself to the upliftment of any given section of humanity, but rather announces a desire to transform the entire human family.' Just as British attitudes must meet the Muslim community halfway, British Muslims must be willing to contribute to the cultural, social and political fabric of society.

What is their contribution to Britain's cultural mosaic? Where is British Islam's contribution to music, literature and the arts? What about innovative social service programs or successful voluntary sector organizations? How about groundbreaking medical research and development?

There are Muslims doing all of these things and more. No doubt, their stories need to find their way on to newsprint and the airwaves. But instead of these being isolated, disparate individual efforts, the work of building Britain must become a national vision for the Muslim community. In the absence of such a vision, the strident rejection of a broader identity by the young and disenfranchised will continue to gain both support and influence.

Just as anti-war movement brought British Muslims on board as partners in protest, the British Muslim voice must find its permanent and rightful place within all areas of our dynamic civil society.

But a central question remains: what room is there for normalising the existence of religious minorities in this increasingly secular society?

The halal meat controversy provides a litmus test of just how open and tolerant we really are. Unlike other issues, the present criticism of Muslim and Jewish ritual is not coming from the traditional right, but with issues and arguments more often associated with the liberal left. Muslims regard the sudden interest in halal meat with suspicion. It feels like a too convenient target for those with an axe to grind - and a chance for animal welfare groups to gain some publicity at their expense.

In the absence of genuine dialogue and understanding, British Muslims will continue to feel alienated and resist integration. Any hopes of capturing Islam's inherent universalism or vision will be dashed against the decade-old cliché-questions. What a pity that we seem to be better at integrating our diner menus, than we do our communities.

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