

Chapter 1

Introduction

During one of my visits to a mosque, while waiting to meet the imam for an interview, I sat in a corner on the carpeted floor of the main prayer room. On my left, with a Qur'an in his lap, sat a man named Abul¹ with whom I engaged in general conversation until the time of prayer arrived. Normally, before the prayer, the worshippers tend to situate themselves towards the front of the hall, filling each row and closing spaces between people as they move.² The worshippers even make gestures of invitation to those behind to join the incomplete row. I have observed this process many times in mosques of various kinds and differing affiliations to Muslim schools of thought.³ To my surprise, Abul never attempted to fill any space in the rows before him. Instead, I had the impression that he preferred very much to remain behind. Indeed, his efforts were so successful that Abul stood alone behind the last complete row of worshippers. The prayer soon finished, and as usual, people exchanged greetings and shook hands, even with those whom they had met for the first time. However, nobody approached Abul. He returned to his corner, sat alone and read his Qur'an.

Although unusual, this would not have particularly attracted my attention were it not for an elderly worshipper who approached me and took me aside. Upon reaching a distance that presumably he thought would prevent Abul from overhearing us, he took my right arm with his hand and whispered close,

Stay away from him. He is not a good brother. He has been in prison and we hope that he'll go somewhere else for his prayers. Those like him do not change: they say that they've changed but they don't. We are honest Muslims and we do not want trouble, especially with the police. Take care, and do not speak or sit near to him – or you could be in trouble. Those like him are bad Muslims: there is nothing to learn from them other than bad things and sins.

He left as abruptly as he had approached and without another word. Abul had not overheard us, but he had seen us. He looked at me and I could see in his eyes that he knew precisely what had happened. This was probably not something new to him; it was likely that many others had been made aware that Abul was a former prisoner in this same way. Unsmilingly, Abul resumed reading the Qur'an with a slight, nearly imperceptible, back and forth rhythmic movement.

Abul's experience of isolation intrigued me. In that exact moment I found myself committed to a profoundly intense and demanding (both physically and psychologically) research that would go on to absorb more than 4 years of my academic life as well as much of my private life. It was November 2003 when, in Scotland, Abul became the first respondent in my investigation of the experience of prison, life after prison and the challenges that these Muslims face, not only from mainstream society but also from their own communities.

After the case of Richard Reid, who allegedly converted to Islam while at Feltham Young Offenders' Institution in West London and then tried to blow up a plane in December 2001 by means of a bomb concealed in his shoe, there has been an increasing, and nearly morbid, interest in Muslim prisoners. Coinciding with this growing attention has been an alarmist mass media message that prisons in the United Kingdom are becoming training camps for future terrorists. During the 1990s, however, it was difficult to trace any real interest in the 'faith' of Muslim prisoners, and so they remained just that – ordinary prisoners who often had less facilities to practise their religion than their Christian fellow-inmates (Beckford and Gilliat 1998). If some rare discussion could be read, it would be found within the records of the British Parliament and House of Lords rather than on the pages of newspapers. In fact, some Lords and parliamentarians did raise concerns during those years about the treatment of Muslim prisoners and the provisions for their religious needs, which were part of those Human Rights that the Parliament had endorsed. Finally, on 30 March 2000, The Lord Bishop of Bradford was able to announce, 'I welcome the appointment of Maqsood Ahmed as the new Muslim adviser to prisons' and challenge whether the increase of Muslim prisoners should be linked to poverty, lack of education and social problems.⁴ The introduction of a Muslim adviser to the English and Welsh Prison Service marked an important step towards a centralised control over the provision of religious 'pastoral care' to Muslim prisoners. Even though I have not the space here to discuss the history of the prison chaplaincy and its development,⁵ it is worth mentioning that before the year 2000 the individual prison establishments had to

provide, where required, such services and this was mainly organised through Muslim volunteers or local imams. Any adult Muslim man can be an imam and lead the prayers on Friday, and before 9/11, many establishments did not ask for particular security checks. It is important to highlight this fact as it partially explains the reason behind the Prison Service's concerns and the mass media's frequent panic about the possibility of prison imams radicalising Muslim prisoners. Having no central knowledge of who was preaching to the Muslim prisoners increased the suspicion surrounding the figure of the prison imam, who was already barely tolerated within prisons (Beckford and Gilliat 1998). The increasing awareness that the number of Muslim prisoners could only grow and the introduction of new antiterrorist legislation (which may increase the numbers of those convicted of, or on remand for, terrorism related offences) facilitated the development of the 'Muslim chaplaincy'.⁶

In 2007, the Prison Service in England and Wales employed 34 full-time and 15 part-time 'Muslim chaplains' who, however, had to care, at that time, for about 8,789 Muslim inmates.⁷ Also, specific Muslim organisations formed to provide assistance, often in the form of information, visits and support to the Muslim prisoners and to efficiently train a new generation of professional Muslim imams (El-Hassan 2002; Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Bajwa 2007). However, the 7/7 London terrorist attack and the failed attempt on 21/7, together with a series of uncovered plots across the United Kingdom, have refocused attention to the theme 'terrorism, radicalisation and prison'. This has been also reinforced by the fact that Mukhtar Said Ibrahim, a former young offender (who was supposedly radicalised while being incarcerated at Feltham Young Offenders' Institute), was among the four individuals involved in the failed 21/7 attack in London (Radcliffe 2008). As we shall see throughout this book, while concern about the radicalisation of Muslim prisoners has increased, no real attention has been paid to the problems and risks that former Muslim prisoners (especially when young) face both within their communities and the wider society.

Muslims in Prison: Wannabe Terrorists?

As on 26 June 2008, prisons in England and Wales detained 9,496 Muslim prisoners, of which 23 per cent were on remand. This means that Muslims account for about 11 per cent of the overall prison population (82,319), but are only 2.8 per cent of the general UK population (Census 2001). There are nearly four times as many Muslims incarcerated as there would

be if the prisoners proportionally reflected the overall Muslim population. In Scotland, Muslim prisoners represent 1.7 per cent of the overall Scottish prison population (7,205), but Muslims account for less than 0.8 per cent of the total population. Although I will provide some in-depth statistical analysis in Chapter 3, it is worth mentioning that, for the past 11 years, the Muslim population detained in UK prisons has seen an extraordinary increase of 141 per cent (in 1997, the Muslim prison population in the United Kingdom was about 3,681). Of course, it is essential that we read this data, as well as the statistics discussed in Chapter 3, with an awareness that the United Kingdom had an average of 146 prisoners per 100,000 population in 2007, which is the second highest rate in Western Europe. As discussed in Chapter 3, criminologists have clearly linked high incarceration rates to social and economic disadvantages. The Census 2001 has revealed the extent to which Muslim communities in the United Kingdom have been economically and socially left behind (Dobbs et al. 2006) as well as the disadvantaged conditions that many British born Muslims, of various ethnic backgrounds, face today.

Notwithstanding this dramatic reality that certainly increases the number of Muslims from various ethnic backgrounds entering prison,⁸ the mass media have rarely mentioned it. Rather, newspapers and TV programmes have decontextualised the pre-incarceration lives of Muslim prisoners, their differences, their crimes and their religious (or non-religious) experiences within and outside prison, to instead offer an alarmist, stereotyped, picture of Muslim prisoners as a threat to our security. Titles such as 'Our prisons are fertile ground for cultivating suicide bombers',⁹ 'Al-Qaeda bid to recruit inmates',¹⁰ 'Terrorists jailed in UK prisons "to rise tenfold"'¹¹ or 'Muslim gangs "are taking control of prison"'¹² have created a powerful collective imagination of 'prison' as a den of 'wannabe' jihadis.

These misrepresentations are credible to the public because very few people have ever had any experience of prison, visited one or met a Muslim former prisoner. The mass media's rhetoric, which can induce one to conclude that prison harbours the most numerous, trained, ideologically committed and ready-to-die Al-Qaeda cells, has certainly influenced not only ordinary readers but also politicians, ministers and, as we shall see, even academics. This is so much the case that Ms Sturt, the governor of Belmarsh, felt the need, as part of an examination of witnesses for the Select Committee on Home Affairs inquiring into the extension of the 28-day period of detention without trial, to emphasise,¹³

I would be very reluctant to see Muslim prisoners as a group. We have many Muslim prisoners. I have, I think at the last count, 188 Muslim

prisoners. The great majority of my Muslim prisoners have nothing whatsoever to do with Islamist extremism or terrorism, they are just people who are on criminal charges who happen to be Muslim, and it is very important for their well-being and for the health of the organisation that we do not allow ourselves to go into the shorthand of thinking that Muslim equals extremist, because that would be quite wrong.

Governor Sturt's remarks, as we shall discuss in this book, are perfectly right. Muslim prisoners are ordinary people committed to prison for ordinary crimes, which are similar to those of non-Muslim prisoners coming from the same social and economic conditions. Therefore, since the most common crime among British young people is 'violence against the person' (about 20 per cent of the prison population), it is not surprising that about the same proportion (21 per cent) of Muslim prisoners have been convicted for such a crime¹⁴ It is also relevant to highlight that only 1 per cent of all Muslims in prison (both on remand and sentenced) are detained for terrorism related crimes (including cyber crimes), and all of them are under strict surveillance in a few high-security prisons. Nonetheless, from the press to the Parliament, the idea that Muslim prisoners are radicalising through reading material, imams, contact with external visitors and 'the terrorists' is increasingly widespread. Thus, in newspapers, we may periodically come across sentences such as, 'The officers believe that attempts have been made to convert one in 10 of the estimated 8,000 Muslims in the eight high-security prisons in England and Wales to the Al-Qaeda cause in the past two years',¹⁵ or, 'There are also emerging concerns about how terrorists impact on the existing gang culture within the high-security estate and how terrorists may be forging connections with existing gangs.'¹⁶

However, during the examination of witnesses for the Select Committee on Home Affairs, we can read the statement of the Director General of the Prison Service, Mr Wheatley, replying to a question of how much evidence he had of radicalisation in prisons among prisoners serving sentences, on remand for terrorist offences or otherwise, 'It would be wrong to get into the detail of individual cases. We have not at the moment seen much clear evidence that we have radicalisation going on in prison. We think that it is possible that will happen . . .'.¹⁷ If the Director General of the Prison Service could confidently make such a statement after Extremist Monitoring Units [EMU] were developed within prisons, and coordinated by the Prison Service through the Extremist Policy Unit, we may ask from where the newspapers collected their alarmist information.

During my research, it became clear that many of these dramatic tales came from prison officers' anecdotal stories, often made public through

the Prison Officers' Association (POA). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many prison officers show a degree of resentment towards the changes that were introduced to manage the new challenges that the increase of ethnic minorities in prison – and consequently of Muslim prisoners – presents. However, as we also discuss briefly in Chapter 4, although I have met very professional prison officers and some who are devoted beyond the call of duty to the welfare of the prisoners, I cannot deny that there is a certain widespread culture of intolerance and institutional racism towards Muslims, as there was against Black and Asian prisoners before 9/11. So, some of the anecdotes I received while entering a particular prison resulted after a very simple verification to be fully false but powerful enough to create tension between Muslims and non-Muslims within the prison. Some of these attempts succeeded in making prison an even more dangerous place for Muslims, as it has proven to be in the recent past.¹⁸ Certainly, the fact that new non-Muslim prisoners are often 'informed' that they risk to be victims of 'the Muslims' does not help to maintain a secure establishment.¹⁹ I had the impression that the Prison Officers' Association used the controversy surrounding Muslim prisoners to increase political and contractual pressure on the Prison Service. However, there are increasing numbers of prison officers who genuinely believe to be 'defending' the country against terrorists and, as one clearly stated, 'Islamic attempts to destroy our civilisation'.

Journalists, prison officers and politicians are not the only ones interested in the reasons for such a surprising increase of Muslims in prison, who are ever more often referred to as 'Muslim criminals'. Academics, although very recently, in the field of criminology (Spalek 2002; Quraishi 2005; Spalek et al. 2008), sociology (Macey 2002) and religious studies (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Gilliat 2008), security studies, and more rarely, anthropology (Alexander 2000, 2004) have attempted to make sense of this phenomenon. We will discuss some of the available literature in Chapter 2 of this book. One of the main aspects that we need to address is the shift in focus from ethnicity to religion, which has characterised the social scientific study of crime among Muslims, after the ethnic riots that have affected England, particularly Bradford, in 1995 and 2001 (Amin 2003). If previous studies, such as Mawby and Batta (1980), depicted an Asian community as mainly law abiding and with a low crime rate, the studies published at the end of the 1990s (Macey 1999a, 1999b; Alexander 2000) provide a picture of young Pakistani and Bangladeshi people as affected by social problems and 'gang culture'. As Alexander (2000, 2004) has rightly argued, some studies, instead of providing an analysis of the socio-economic conditions and environmental challenges these young people had to face, tried to

'discover' the 'culprit'. Spalek (2002) has invited scholars to carefully consider the possible role that religion may have in criminal behaviour. In Chapter 2, we shall see that such an invitation, even when the intention is noble as in Spalek's case, can lead to pernicious essentialism – as Macey's recent controversial studies (2002, 2007) may show.

Although religion plays a role in the rhetoric of some Muslim prisoners and former prisoners, I have argued that identifying the practise of a religion, in this case Islam, as the main factor of increasing criminality among Pakistani, Bangladeshi and other ethnic groups is a misleading and dangerous essentialism (see also Marranci 2008b, 2009). The main risk of these studies, which are mainly based on culturalist approaches and very much simplified versions of 'identity theories' (see Chapter 5), is to end in reinforcing stereotypes. In addition, instead of producing useful analysis, they often espouse what Mamdani has defined as 'Culture Talk' (Mamdani 2004), in which 'every culture has a tangible essence that defines it, and it then explains politics as a consequence of the essence' (2004: 18).

During my research, I realised that to avoid such essentialism and to have a clear picture beyond the stereotypes of prison, I needed, as we shall see in Chapter 3, to engage with these Muslims both during and after their custodial sentences. It was important to observe their lives and discuss with them their experiences of incarceration and the impact that it had on them, not as Muslims, or even Pakistanis, Arabs, Bangladeshis, White converts, British and African-Caribbean people among others, but rather simply as humans. This allowed me to understand the relationship between crime and environment, and also the effect of a large generation gap. Indeed, we shall see that much of the political, yet also scholarly (Pauly 2004; Brighton 2007; Abbas 2007), debate concerning the 'criminal behaviour' of second-generation ethnic minorities, especially when Muslim, suggests that a lack of integration is one of the most relevant factors contributing to it. However, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 3, many scholars, partially following political discourse, have understood 'integration' in an Andersonian (Anderson 1991) abstract dimension of national community. Conversely, I shall suggest that people of any ethnic minority origin, as any other person, integrate into the local, and even the micro-local, dimensions of everyday life in the precise location in which they are situated. We will see, through an analysis of the Census 2001 (of England, Wales and Scotland), that young Muslims are often not integrating into the best neighbourhoods of the country, but rather into areas that are among the worst affected by social dysfunction and crime. Consequently, if we consider that only 130 individuals have been incarcerated for terrorism related offences, then the great

majority of Muslims enter prison for crimes that are very similar in nature, and also in number, to those committed by non-Muslim Whites in similarly deprived areas.

Crime and criminal behaviour are complex phenomena with many contributing variables. Certainly, only individuals, and not their religions, can make the decision to commit a crime. To blame Islam, or any other religion, for social phenomena such as crime means to ignore not only the individuals' agency, but also more complex processes, many of which are based on the relationship between us and the environment. In conclusion, it is important to remember that in the following chapters we are not dealing with 'Muslim prisoners', but instead with human beings who were recognised as, or 'felt to be', Muslim (Marranci 2006, 2008b). Also, many of these individuals, as we shall discuss, rediscovered Islam, as either religion or identity or both, through the experience of prison as an emotional place.

The Research Context

Generally, anthropologists may read diverse ethnographies in preparation for their fieldwork to plan their methodologies. This is unfortunately not the case when the fieldwork focuses on Muslims in prison and former Muslim prisoners. Indeed, as we have seen, very few studies in the United Kingdom have addressed such topics, and none of these were conducted by anthropologists. Although different aspects of prison have attracted the attention of other social scientists,²⁰ as Spalek (2002, 2004; see also Quraishi 2007) has emphasised, studies of religion within prison are in general extremely rare. When religion was considered, as in some American studies (cf. Clear and Sumter 2002; Evans et al. 1995; Fernander et al. 2005), the focus was on Christianity. Furthermore, anthropology, compared to sociology, has shown little interest in prison life in general (Rhodes 2001). One of the reasons for this disinterest, as Rhodes has suggested, is that 'most of today's prisons are a far cry from those of the earlier decades of the twentieth century, in which the occasional sociologist could ply his trade remarkably undisturbed. Contemporary penology involves an increasingly managerial and technological orientation, psychologically and sociologically based forms of classification, and tight control over information and access' (2001: 65). Nonetheless, as I have discussed elsewhere (Marranci 2008b), it is also true that anthropologists have only recently shown interest in Muslims living in urban areas and the problems related to it.

My research began in Scotland²¹ with former Muslim prisoners in November 2003, and before I was able to enter the first of six Scottish prison

establishments, it was May 2004.²² Nonetheless, my contact with former Muslim prisoners increased during all these 4 years of research, and in the end a total of 25 former prisoners in Scotland, and 20 in England, were interviewed more than once. With a few of them, as I will later describe, I was able to develop a deeper relationship which allowed me to observe their post-prison lives and the difficulties that they had to face. After having my research authorised by the HM Scottish Prison Service and receiving the support of the prison chaplaincy, which at the time of my research in Scotland included only Christian denominations, I was able to interview 30 Muslim prisoners;²³ 10 Scottish Prison Service (SPS) officers, of whom 6 were Race Relations Managers (RRMs); 2 chaplains (1 Church of Scotland and 1 Roman Catholic); Mr Clive Fairweather, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons from 1994 to October 2002; and Rev. Dr McLellan, current HM Chief Inspector of Prisons in Scotland. The Muslim prisoners, both sentenced and on remand, were aged between 17 and 35 with sentences ranging from 3 years up to life. Most were of second-generation South Asian backgrounds; however, four of my respondents were Muslim prisoners of Scottish White origin who had converted to Islam while serving their sentences. Although Pakistanis and Bangladeshis represented the majority of the Muslim prisoners I interacted with, I also interviewed six Algerians and three Black Africans.

My experience with the SPS was marked by strong collaboration, and I received full support in the majority of prisons I visited and also relative freedom to interact with the prisoners and, even more, with the officers. I have visited some prisons more than once and this has helped to establish a sense of trust over time. The prison officers, as the two chaplains I was in contact with, understood the aims of my research and devoted considerable time to help me to identify, based upon the parameters I had set, possible prisoners to interview. The prisoners, with few exceptions, collaborated actively with the research and even informed some of their fellow inmates so that they could take part in it. In a few Scottish prisons, the Muslim prisoners numbered less than two or three, which naturally increased the sense of isolation they experienced (see Chapter 4).

I was able to organise focus groups in prisons that held more than three Muslim prisoners, and I was allocated a room for this purpose. The location of the room changed from prison to prison: from one room of the chaplaincy, to one of the interview rooms, or from a reading room of the library to an empty cell (which resulted in many jokes with the prisoners and officers since I looked imprisoned myself). Normally, my visits to the Scottish prisons began with an escorted visit of the prison facility (from the

kitchen to the gym and the different rows of cells), after which I was located in one of the places where the interviews were to take place. The degree of collaboration with some of the prisons was such that I often found that the officers had arranged for some small refreshments (often various kinds of sandwiches, coffee, tea and biscuits) for the interviewees and me. Because of the high level of hospitality, I am not surprised that most Muslim prisoners volunteered for the interviews and, in certain prisons, I ended having the entire Muslim population involved. All the interviews and interactions with the prisoners took place without the presence of prison officers, even in the case of focus groups. Nonetheless, I never was at risk or felt threatened. Indeed, assaults on researchers or other non-uniformed visitors are extremely rare (Quraishi 2007; Martin 2002).

While immediate trust and cooperation marked my relationship with the SPS, which enabled me to swiftly start the research within Scottish prisons, the English and Welsh HM Prison Service demonstrated to have a very bureaucratic approach to academic research within prisons (see also Quraishi 2007; Beckford et al. 2005; Beckford and Gilliat 1998). Although I understood that the topic was particularly sensitive in the aftermath of 9/11, some initial attempts to stop the research appeared to be unjustified and difficult to explain since my research in Scotland had been successfully completed the year before. The negotiation of my visits at the national level (which means access to prisons of all categories in all English and Welsh regions) brought me several times to London, where the Prison Service Headquarters are located. These visits became important also for establishing my contacts with organisations such as IQRA Trust, the Al-Khoei foundation, the Muslim Youth Helpline and others that work in one way or another with Muslim prisoners and former prisoners. It also helped me to meet and know former Muslim prisoners in the region.

My visits to English prisons began in July 2005, and I concluded my field-work in prison²⁴ in January 2007. During this time, I visited 16 establishments: from Cat D open prisons to high-security establishments, from young offenders' institutions to a women's prison. This has allowed me to interview 100 Muslim prisoners (of whom 20 were women). The majority were South Asians (particularly of second-generation background), followed by Black Africans, African-Caribbeans, Arabs and White British converts. Conversely to my experience in Scotland, my main points of reference in these establishments were the prison chaplaincy and the prison imams, who often organised recurrent visits to a particular prison on my behalf (for more on the role of prison imams in other prison research, see Quraishi 2007). Despite initial difficulties, full collaboration and a high degree of

freedom and participant observation, which I did not expect, eventually characterised my research in English prisons.

Once underway, the research progressed much in the same way as it had done in Scotland, except for the fact that I was able to spend extended periods within high-security establishments, sometimes for up to 10 hours a day.²⁵ In certain prisons with a high number of prisoners, multiple visits were granted.

During my visits, I was allowed to take part in Islamic teachings, Friday prayers and sermons; I also had the opportunity to observe imams' activities and spend time with Muslim prisoners both in their cells and during their association time. Indeed, the fact that I often lacked an 'official' room for interviews, and the fact that the Muslim prisoners were often detained in different wings of the prison, meant that I had to reach the prisoners with the help of the prison imam. I had many occasions to conduct focus groups, repeat interviews with some prisoners and officers, and accept prisoners' 'hospitality' in their cells, where they often offered me some soft drinks or even food. Fortunately I enjoyed very good relationships (with extremely few exceptions) with staff, chaplains and prisoners.

As with my research in Scotland, I mainly used opened-ended interviews, a series of in-depth interviews (see Marshall et al. 1999), and some focus group discussions. Although the interviews were pre-prepared and planned, flexibility was adopted so to investigate particular topics in-depth. English was the main language spoken in all interviews. All the interviewees who volunteered to take part in this research were informed about the aims and scope of it, and the proposed outcome. Certainly, for an anthropologist conducting fieldwork in prison, prisoners are to be considered a very 'vulnerable group' (Gelsthorpe et al. 1999).²⁶ With this in mind, although researchers should grant anonymity and confidentiality, as in any other social scientific research, they should also be aware of existing legislation that can limit such confidentiality (see also Quraishi 2007; Beckford et al. 2005). This means that, while conducting fieldwork in prison, the researcher should be sure to inform the respondents that any criminal activity (or intention) in prison, any activity which may endanger anyone and also any criminal activities that were not previously disclosed, should be reported.²⁷

I fully informed my respondents of these restrictions to their right to confidentiality (prisoners and prison officers alike), but fortunately, during these 4 years of research, I have rarely found myself in such a position. Indeed, in one only instance did I decide to report what a respondent had told me – an incident in which, during an extremely emotional and difficult interview, my respondent had confessed to me that he was planning to take

his own life. I was never asked to disclose any details of what I discussed with my respondents by the police or the Prison Service, despite the fact that I also had contact with prisoners charged with, or sentenced for, terrorism-related crimes.

Conducting anthropological fieldwork in prison, and outside it with former Muslim prisoners, means to be exposed to distressing social, economic and personal tragedies. Emotions run high and to be 'fully' detached is impossible. Prison research is both time consuming and requires considerable psychological adjustments. For someone not familiar with such an environment, spending hours inside a prison can be a difficult test (King 2000). However, month after month, what was at first a mysterious world becomes more familiar and some aspects, such as entering prison and passing through the security checks, even become routine. This is also part of 'learning prison', since routine, waiting, dead time and emptiness are part of prison life, and so important to participant observation. As we shall discuss in this book (Chapter 4), the environment of prison itself is essential for understanding not only the slow everyday life of prisoners, but also the effect that such an environment, through emotions, has on the experience of religion.

Islam in Prison or Prison Islam?

Although my respondents, both inside and outside prison, differed in age, gender, ethnicity, nationality and family background (including Islamic affiliations), they had something in common: before their experience of prison, they did not actively practise Islam and did not consider Islam to be an essential part of their lives. They defined themselves as Muslims primarily because of their family backgrounds. Hence, the great majority of those who declare, upon entering prison, that their faith is Islam have in reality abandoned its practice at some point in their lives; usually in their early teens (see also Chapters 2 and 3). Yet even after a few days of confinement in prison, this majority normally rediscover Islam. I will later explain in detail the process and the consequences of this 'enlightenment' and sudden reconversion to Islam. However, it would be very difficult to fully understand such process if we did not pay close attention to the human experience of entering prison and the impact that the prison environment has on the individual. For this reason, in Chapter 4, I will discuss these issues not only from a sociological perspective, but also from a neurocognitive and psychological one.

As we shall discuss in Chapter 4, the narrations I have collected from both former and current Muslim prisoners show an astonishing homogeneity in describing the emotionally powerful experience of incarceration. These descriptions include feelings of fear, wonder, objectification, disorientation, humiliation and claustrophobia that are experienced together with a strong sense of alienation and dreamlike experience. First time prisoners, in particular, use their imagination, which is influenced also by the mass media and Hollywood (Mason 2003), to form expectations about prison. Fear of physical assault, and especially sexual violence, are the norm. Indeed, as also my research has confirmed, violence, in its various forms, and the loss of control over one's life remain among the main anxieties that all prisoners face (Jones and Schmid 2000). Prisoners find themselves severed from their friends and relatives, meaning that they have been forcefully removed from their emotional networks – including partners and children in many cases. They have to cope with an unusual level of emotional deprivation. We shall see how all these events trigger a natural instinct within the prisoners: survival (Toch 1977). Survival in prison is often achieved through strategies. Religion is surely one of those strategies (Greer 2002) for a substantial number of prisoners, and it is so for nearly an entirety of Muslim prisoners.

We shall later observe that even the rituals of Islam and their practice (such as prayers, ablutions, dietary requirements and festivities) acquire an extra layer of meaning (though with some differences in the case of women), which helps the prisoners in their everyday interaction with the prison environment. The more my research progressed, the more it became clear that my respondents did not turn to Islam because of their acquaintance with the Qur'an (in reality, very few could understand it) or any other literature, or because of indoctrination (as many journalists, and even prison officers, believed). Instead, turning to religion, in an environment that imposes an unusual loss of control over one's life, helped them to make sense of their lost freedom. Indeed, an eschatological explanation of their imprisonment and spending what most perceived to be a 'useless life' marked by boredom, helped to fight back nihilism and alienation.

As the reader may expect, Muslim male adults are not the only ones to be detained in prison. Muslim women prisoners are an unfortunate reality that remains completely unstudied, despite representing 3 per cent of all female prisoners. In Chapter 4, although briefly,²⁸ I will provide a glimpse into their life inside. Female Muslim prisoners have, in a majority of cases, dependent children under the age of 18 (Prison Reform Trust 2000). The detachment from their own children and the sense of guilt for being,

as many have said, 'a bad mother', shape how Islam as religion is lived among them. It is thus not surprising that of all reasons for 'rediscovering' or 'reverting' to Islam, the most prominent was to become a good mother; an example for their own children. Although this was commonly the 'official reason', attentive observation offered many other reasons for which Islam was popular among the female prisoners. As I will explain in Chapter 4, Islam becomes for some women a form of 'shield' from difficult realities linked to contradictions between their pre-incarceration days and post-incarceration life. Interestingly enough, a comparative analysis between female Muslim prisoners and male Muslim prisoners revealed some substantial differences. For the women, contrary to the men, there was a general agreement that being a good Muslim while in prison is impossible in reality. Furthermore, the ritualistic aspects of Islam, including Ramadan, had less of an emotional value when compared to the situation I have found in men's prisons. Among women, Islam was clearly used to form in-group communities of support and alliance that helped to protect themselves from the prison environment and minimise dangerous gossip outside the in-group.

Children have not been spared the experience of prison either. Some as young as 12 undertake, once arrested and remanded in custody, the same traumatic journey that adult male and female prisoners do. Of the approximate 12,298 young people in detention today, 13 per cent are Muslim. If a sense of insecurity, fear and preconceptions of prison as a survival-of-the-fittest dungeon of violence affected adult prisoners, it is even stronger among these teenagers (see also Solomon 2003). In many cases, the conditions of young Muslim offenders were more difficult than those of their adult counterparts. Furthermore, these children appeared to be deprived of affection and attention which, to aid a successful rehabilitation, they were in desperate need of. As we shall discuss in Chapter 4, one of the main reasons for which Islam is so popular within young offenders' institutions (despite that most young offenders had long since ceased practising) is that Islam provides a means of connecting with each other and can offer an efficient shield from the psychological suffering of being detached from loved ones. Unfortunately, many young offenders' institutions are inconveniently located in areas outside the city with little or no public transport. This increases the lack of contact with their families. My research has clearly suggested that a lack of substantial contact between young Muslim prisoners and their families, or a total rejection of a young Muslim offender by relatives, facilitates the risk of radicalism. Indeed, as we shall discuss in later chapters, some young Muslim prisoners, affected by both depression and a

lack of contact with family members, even declared that they would be ready to join the ‘mujahidin’ in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

In this book, I will often remind the reader that Muslim prisoners are humans like any others, and as such, they share most of the physical, psychological and environmental effects and disruptions that prison normally induces. Yet there is one aspect that singles out Muslim prisoners and makes them ‘special’ within prisons: an awareness of their being Muslim. Religion in prison has never, before the relatively recent interest in Islam, been so under the spotlight. Despite all the policies and efforts of the Scottish and English and Welsh Prison Services, my research has clearly demonstrated that prisoners and officers alike tend to see the ‘Muslim’ first and the fellow human-being after. I have no qualms to say that prisons in the United Kingdom today risk to become Muslim-centric. Of course, we have seen how the mass media exploit prison stories related to Muslims, and consequently how the Prison Services, especially in England and Wales, attempt to demonstrate to both the public and politicians that they are ‘managing’ the difficult situation. This has undoubtedly increased the surveillance of the general Muslim prison population, thus drawing a great deal of attention to their religion (Spalek et al. 2008).²⁹ This has meant that some officers, especially in some Cat A prisons, visibly or latently read Muslim symbols like the beard, the cap or even attendance at the Friday prayer as a sign of radicalism or even possible terrorist affiliations. As we shall see in this book, Muslim prisoners who have been particularly targeted or bullied because of their ‘Islamic’ appearance or devotion often display strong emotional reactions, expressed through an Islamic rhetoric, against not only the prison but also the state and society.

It is only after an understanding of the socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds of these prisoners, their lives outside prison (Chapter 3) and their experience of prison as human beings who ‘feel to be Muslims’ (Chapter 5, Marranci 2006, 2008b), that we can start to ask: what kind of Islam exists in prison? Prison imams have a fundamental role in helping Muslim prisoners to understand the main tenets of orthodox Islam. However, as we shall consider in Chapters 6 and 7, their roles have strong limitations. Although the Prison Service in Scotland is just beginning to add a Muslim adviser to the prison chaplaincy and the Prison Service of England and Wales have enormously improved the religious provisions for their Muslim prisoners (Gilliat 2008), during my research I have observed that the influence of these measures on how Islam is understood in prison is rather minimum. Imams, in the best of cases, are seen by some prisoners as ‘facilitators’ – as a kind of trusted link between themselves and the prison establishment.

At worst, prison imams are no more than officers doing a 'prison job'. As I will explain in Chapter 5, it is the prison environment in itself that has the most powerful impact upon how Islam is interpreted in prison. This is so much the case that I suggest in later chapters that we may speak of a 'prison Islam' rather than 'Islam in prison'.

The impact of the prison environment is not just 'symbolic' but actually, I would say, 'biological' since neurological and cognitive elements are involved. To understand this, as discussed in Chapter 5 (see also Marranci 2006, 2008b), we have to make sense of how we, as human beings, experience what we call emotions and feelings, how we learn and how religious faith is not just the result of a particular cultural process. Indeed, an accurate analysis would argue that Muslims in prison turn to, or return to, Islam as an identity not because of having been introduced to, or convinced by, theological knowledge. As many prison imams told me, a significant number of Muslim prisoners do not even know how to pray correctly and that they show little interest in theological debates, but still profess a strong faith in Islam. With few exceptions, faith in prison is not the result of an intellectual commitment, but rather emotional processes.

Muslim prisoners live in a confined social world with most freedoms removed from them. The loss of control over one's life is, as Toch (1977) has demonstrated, part of the pain inflicted upon the prisoner. As will be explained in the chapters that follow, all prisoners would 'act' to change reality, in particular to create 'emotions' which can lead to feelings conducive to the reinforcement of that 'feel to be' so important for psychological (and consequently physical) well-being.³⁰ In other words, the main teacher of Islam in prison is prison itself through fear, and other associated emotions, which it induces in all prisoners. In Chapter 5, we will see how these emotions shake the prisoners' certainties, leading to two different modes of 'experiencing' Islam.

Islamic Extremism in Prison: Reality or Fantasy?

We have seen that it is possible to speak of a 'prison Islam' – but is extremism and radicalisation in prison a dangerous reality or an exaggeration, if not a fantasy, of some journalists? The problem is not to answer the question, but rather that the question in itself is misleading and so any answer will be far from satisfactory. However, the question, which is frequently asked, tells us that some, including the Prison Service, understand Islamic 'extremism', 'radicalisation' and even 'terrorism' within prison as a real,

tangible thing. For many, it is something that can be 'seen', 'spotted', 'defined' and consequently addressed (see also Marranci 2009). Analysing the discourses available about radicalism in prison, we can see that 'this thing' (referred to with various *isms* such as extremism, radicalism, Islamism, fundamentalism and terrorism) behaves more like a virus than an object, spreading and infecting at every opportunity. Isolation, prevention, removal or even (as in the case of the suggestion to build special prisons for Islamic extremists) 'lazarettos' are proposed in order to stop it. Similar to the case of a real virus, 'the thing' or the prison *Islamicisms*³¹ are spread by actions and objects. Although in this case it is not sneezes and unwashed forks that endanger the prison population, but rather tricky imams, undercover visitors, smuggled cassettes, Arabic (whom very few can read) jihadi pamphlets, and even ordinary articles of newspapers, *Al-Jazeera*, and *Nashid*.³²

In reality, as we shall see in Chapter 6, the different Islamicisms are not 'things' and are certainly not viral, not even in a 'symbolic' way. Extremism³³ is a *process*, and if certain radical literature, inspirational songs and sermons have an attraction for some people it is not because such materials are the *reason* for the radicalisation process, but rather because they are the tools to maintain it. It is precisely because extremism is a process, and not a 'thing', that it is difficult to measure or manage. Furthermore, many of the new prison policies designed to 'fight' it are not only aiming to failure, but will also potentially backfire (including after the custodial sentence, see Chapter 7). If I am correct in suggesting that we are observing a process, the first action to undertake is to understand it. As we shall see in Chapter 6, this means to start from prison, as an environment, and from what we have learnt of 'prison Islam'. As we have discussed above (see also Chapter 4), Muslims have a more difficult life within prison than other prisoners and this has an impact upon how Islam is understood. Toch (1975) has observed that the most maltreated prisoners, contrary to what may be expected, are not those who tend to break down psychologically, but rather it is those inmates whose idea of 'dignity' is the most violated. In prison, especially for prisoners of Muslim background, their ideas and subjective norms of how they must be treated are indeed often, voluntarily or because of prison regulations, extremely violated and this helps to form the idea that they are experiencing 'injustice'. Hence, the idea of dignity and justice, as we shall see, plays a fundamental role in the discourse of prison Islam.

My observations have suggested that prison induces a dualistic way of thinking and dualistic worldviews. In Chapter 6, we will discuss how Islam can become part of this dualistic prison thinking. Certainly, the most

evident effect of this dualistic mode, which affects not only Muslims, is the simplification of the prison world into Muslim and non-Muslim, halal and haram, and Islamic and un-Islamic. Some Muslim prisoners, however, developed an extreme version of this dualism and started to isolate themselves from the rest of the prison population, including other Muslims whom they considered to be 'plastic Muslims'. We will discuss in Chapter 6 how tawhid (the oneness of God) is at the centre of this extreme dualism and how *tawhid*, in some cases, is transformed from a theological tenet into an ideological tool of survival and a mechanism of maintaining one's own autobiographical-self. However, my research has emphasised that not all Muslim prisoners who adhere to this ideology – developed not by means of material culture but rather through cognitive and emotional experiences of the physical and social prison environment – can be defined 'extremists' or 'radicals'.

Another essential element of the process should be presented here: the shift from a *doctrinal mode* of Islamic religiosity to an *imagistic one* (Whitehouse 2004). I will explain how prisoners of Muslim backgrounds, after having ceased to practise Islam, rediscover their religion more through an 'epiphany' than a theological commitment. This process has an impact on how some Muslims react to the official version of Islam sponsored by the prison authorities and which the prison imam embodies. The emotional impact of prison, the frequent extreme lack of dignity perceived by some Muslim prisoners and the feeling that, despite their crimes, they are in prison because of a deeply rooted, eschatological injustice, provoke not only those 'cognitive openings' that many Muslim prisoners experience, but also a rarer spontaneous exegetical reflection. Imams within the prison (as indeed outside) operate inside a 'doctrinal mode of religiosity' that is based upon doctrines derived from scriptures (as in all monotheistic religions). However, since the majority of Muslim prisoners have had very little exposure to the doctrinal mode of Islamic religiosity, the traumatic experience of prison facilitates 'insights' and 'mystical' experiences (i.e. *spontaneous exegetical reflection*) in which emotions and feelings matter more than theological orthodoxy (of which very few Muslim prisoners have pre-prison knowledge). It is perhaps, then, unsurprising that the doctrinal mode of Islam offered within prison has little, if any, appeal to some Muslim prisoners.

Therefore, going back to the question of whether Islamic extremism exists in prison, we can see how the answer cannot be a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Today within prisons there exist conditions conducive to the transformation of 'prison Islam' into an 'emotional' version that, facilitated by

spontaneous exegetical reflection, ends in an imagistic mode of Islamic religiosity. This imagistic mode, as opposed to the doctrinal mode, is surely more prone to instability, essentialism, charismatic leadership, enclavement, fanaticism and irrational violence. In recent years, an increasing hardship for Muslim prisoners; an over focus on their religion; an increased abuse of segregation regimes; an increase within prisons of Muslim/non-Muslim tension; and a generalised surveillance and suspicion of even basic orthodox practices of Islam may transform the imagistic mode of Islamic religiosity from a relatively rare form of prison Islam to the most popular. Since, as we have just seen, 'Islamic extremism' in prison is in reality a process, the relationship between the prison environment and personal identities, as well as group affiliations, are of paramount importance to prevent the shift from the doctrinal mode of religiosity to the imagistic one.

Surely, the role of the prison imam should be reinforced and updated based upon these findings. At the same time, prevention is the only real solution and this means to reconsider how Muslims in prison are treated and the security policies recently introduced. Yet, as we shall see in Chapter 7, although this may reduce the risk within prison, it would not resolve the other, currently underestimated, problems (and potential risk of terrorism) that a lack of support for former Muslim prisoners has created. Indeed, although the mass media, the government and the general public seem concerned about 'extremism' in prison, it is certainly not from within the prison that the public face the danger of becoming victims of a terrorist attack.

Notes

- ¹ All names have been changed to respect the anonymity of the people involved in the research.
- ² Muslims pray in rows which respect a certain distance between them so as to allow them sufficient space for the prostration.
- ³ Among Muslims, we can find four traditional Sunni Muslim schools of thought or Madhahib that have been named after their founders: the Hanafis, Malikis, Shafi's and Hanbalis.
- ⁴ Lords Hansard 30 March 2000 (200330-03) Column 908, www.publications.parliament.uk
- ⁵ Others have brilliantly written about it (see for instance Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Gilliat 2008); this book will not discuss Muslim chaplaincy in any detail since it is beyond the aims of the present work and the topic deserves a specific in-depth analysis.
- ⁶ Muslims do not have any equivalent institution to the Christian chaplaincy, and so it is improper to speak of Muslim chaplains. However, since the structure has

been modelled on the established Church of England chaplaincy tradition, the Prison Service officially refers to prison imams as Muslim Chaplains. This is also because they have to provide, as any other chaplain, general assistance and care to any prisoner regardless of religious affiliation. Nonetheless, throughout the book, I will mainly employ the term 'prison imam' since the majority of my respondents use this terminology.

- ⁷ It is important to emphasise here that prison statistics cannot be precise because of the day-to-day changes in the prison population. Therefore, even substantial differences may exist in the statistical data that I will use in this book.
- ⁸ More often than not, for short-term prison sentences; see Chapters 3 and 7.
- ⁹ *Times Online*, July 30, 2005, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article549567.ece
- ¹⁰ *The Sunday Times*, September 28, 2008.
- ¹¹ *The Telegraph*, November 09, 2007, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1568748/Terrorists-jailed-in-UK-prisons-to-rise-tenfold.html
- ¹² *The Guardian*, May 25, 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/may/25/prisonsandprobation.ukcrime
- ¹³ *The Guardian*, May 25, 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/may/25/prisonsandprobation.ukcrime
- ¹⁴ Lords Hansard for 26 June 2008 (pt 0002) Column WA272, www.publications.parliament.uk
- ¹⁵ Leppard, David, 'Al-Qaeda bid to recruit inmates', *The Sunday Times*, September 28, 2008.
- ¹⁶ Alan Travis, 'Officials warn of terrorist links to prison gangs', *The Guardian*, Monday, 3 March 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/mar/03/prisons-terrorism.uk
- ¹⁷ Select Committee on Home Affairs Minutes of Evidence, Wednesday, 7 November 2007, Q290, www.publications.parliament.uk/
- ¹⁸ David Callaghan, 'Muslim prisoners "at risk of attack" in youth jails', *The Guardian*, 30 September 2005, www.guardian.co.uk/society/2005/sep/30/youthjustice.law, Richard Ford, 'Watchdog says Muslim prisoners ask to be isolated at Frankland', *The Times*, August 20, 2008, www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article4568736.ece
- ¹⁹ See also Jamie Doward, 'Muslim gangs "are taking control of prison"', *The Guardian*, May 25, 2008, www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/may/25/prisonsandprobation.ukcrime
- ²⁰ For an overview of prison studies worldwide, see, for example, O'Brien 1982; Spierenburg 1991. For specific studies in the different fields see among others, Cohen and Taylor 1972; Finkelstein 1993; Genders and Player 1989; King and Morgan 1976; King and Elliot 1977; Liebling 1992; Sykes 1958.
- ²¹ The research was funded by The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, the University of Aberdeen, and The British Academy (Grant Ref: SG-4091).
- ²² Because, as explained, anonymity is essential in a research such as the one I conducted, I can only say that the six Scottish prisons included all categories and regions so that the sample was representative of the prison population. The same applies to the English and Welsh prison institutions.

- ²³ At the time, there were about 80 Muslim prisoners detained in Scottish prisons, and all of them, save for two, were male and Sunni. The majority of Scottish Muslim prisoners are of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin.
- ²⁴ My contact with the Prison Services, former prisoners and prison associations in the United Kingdom continue to this day.
- ²⁵ Currently, the Prison Service classifies establishments into four levels of security. The decision to allocate a prisoner to a specific category depends upon the severity of the crime committed and the risk of escape posed. The highest security category is A; categories B and C, respectively, are for prisoners who do not pose an extreme risk to society but whose escape should carefully be prevented. All these three categories of prison are closed prisons. For prisoners nearing the end of their sentence, or at a very low level of risk, there are open prisons (Category D or commonly known as 'Cat D') in which prisoners are often allowed licences to visit home or to visit nearby cities as part of their final rehabilitation.
- ²⁶ But see also the Ethical Guidelines of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) which, as an active member, I am obliged to adopt during my fieldwork.
- ²⁷ See Criminal Law Act 1967 (s4 and s5) and Official Secrets Act 1989.
- ²⁸ Another specific publication will be devoted to the topic.
- ²⁹ See also the 2006/2007 Annual Report of the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, www.inspectorates.homeoffice.gov.uk/hmiprison/docs/annual-report-99-00/
- ³⁰ Interestingly, self-harm, or even suicide, can be read as extreme, and self-destructive, forms of this process. Indeed, suicide can be seen as the most extreme 'act of identity' possible against the prison.
- ³¹ Of course, Islamicisms are not the only *isms* existing within prison. Others such as racism, hooliganism and 'Christianicism' are very much present but generally deemed, as of today, to be irrelevant or unthreatening despite their potential.
- ³² Arabic songs, which may include different Islamic themes. Of course, some may also praise the 'mujahidin' or the 'martyrs' of different wars or 'resistance'. However, in many cases, due to the difficult poetic Qur'anic Arabic used, many listeners, if not Arabs or well educated in Arabic, are unable to understand the text.
- ³³ To use the most quoted term, but this applies to the other Islamicisms as well.