

Constructing an Islamic Environment in Northern Ireland

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This paper describes the difficulties that Muslims in Northern Ireland have experienced in establishing an Islamic environment. Northern Ireland has a long tradition of religious and political conflicts between its Catholic and Protestant communities. The nature of these political events in the region, and the history of the local Muslim community, have had implications on the establishment of Islamic spaces and the ways in which Muslims organize their religious lives. However, at the risk of endangering relationships with the Protestant community, Muslims still feel the need to build a formal mosque.

Northern Ireland is an environment marked by on-going religious and socio-political tensions and struggles between the Catholic and Protestant communities, culminating in more than 30 years of terrorism. These events have marked Northern Ireland as an unusual Christian place, a context hardly conducive to the establishment of an Islamic environment for the officially estimated 2000 Muslims (Census 2001) living in Northern Ireland (Marranci, 2003). This paper discusses the way Muslims organize their religious lives within the various expressions of sectarianism, and the different circumstances in which the Catholic versus Protestant opposition affects people's actions and behaviour. The information presented in this paper is based on the author's two years of fieldwork and ethnographic study of the Muslim presence in Northern Ireland.

Despite the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, the peace process has appeared to be more difficult than expected (Hennessey, 2000). Today, Northern Irish society goes far beyond political conflicts, in effect, sectarianism has become part of everyday life (Bell, 1990). Indeed, even a large number of non-sectarian people in Northern Ireland still divide

society along these lines, creating borders that are not easily transgressed, even for employment and livelihood purposes (see figure 1). One of the primary functions of Northern Irish sectarianism is to maintain the neighbourhood's religious homogeneity as much as possible (Murtagh, 2002). For instance, during the peace process, people living near the interfaces between the two communities have increasingly asked their councillors for the construction of new partition walls – the so-called 'peace walls'. To understand this political oxymoron, 'peace walls' need to be thought of as a mark of territorial division that is difficult to challenge, or even change. Therefore, in Northern Ireland space is never neutral; space is categorized, symbolized, and defined. In other words, interpreted. Subsequently, religious space becomes highly controversial. A Protestant or a Catholic church is not only a place of worship, but also becomes a political symbol.

Migration, diaspora, and displacement have had a strong impact on Muslims, who for different reasons have had to leave their homes – for example to flee dictatorships or due to economic hardships. In host countries,

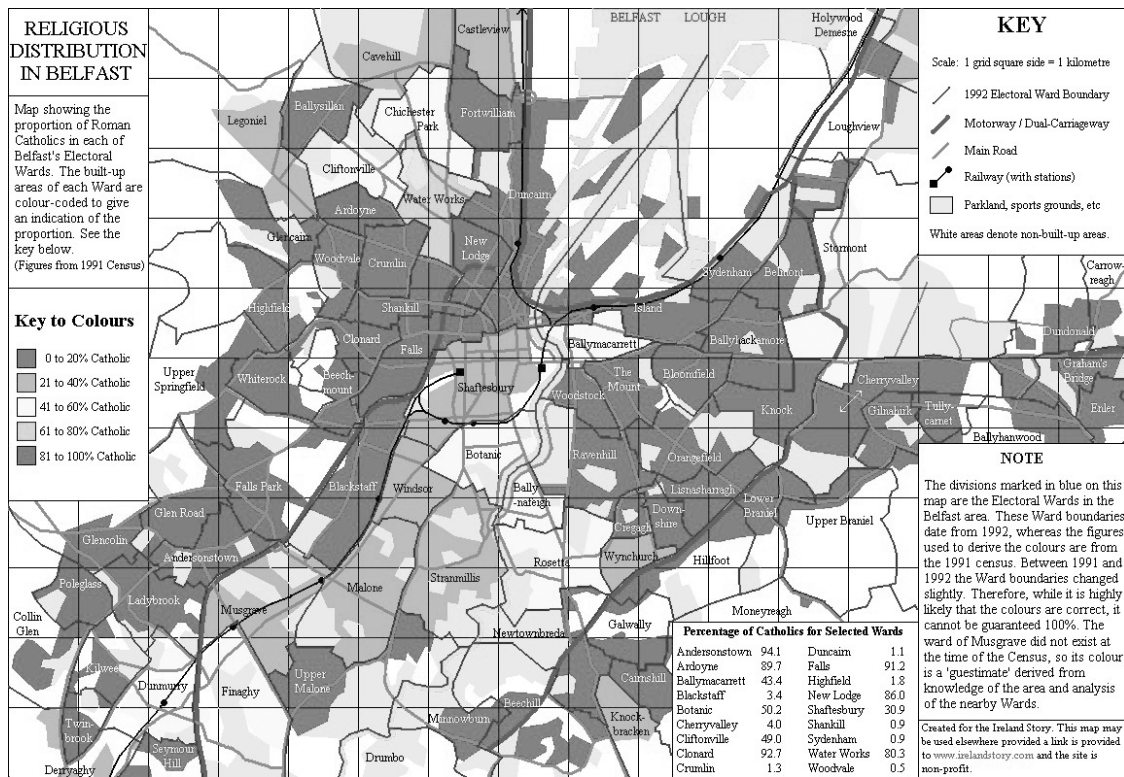


Figure 1. Map of Belfast highlighting the Catholic versus Protestant areas.

they are often unable to reconstruct the networks of relatives and friends that they had formed in their homelands, which are particularly important to the social lives of women. Furthermore, the experience of unemployment, racism, discrimination, and recently Islamophobia, has affected their confidence in a 'liberal' Europe (see Al-Sayyad and Castells, 2001; Haddad, 2002). Muslims in Northern Ireland not only have to face these problems, but also have to adapt to the peculiar socio-political environment that I have summarized above.

In this environment, religious identity becomes an essential part of the lives of Muslim immigrants. Frequent visits to the local mosques and, above all, participation in the Friday congregational prayers (*salat al-jumma*), are often the only occasions on which Muslims are able to meet other Muslims in the region. Within the Northern

Irish mosques and prayer rooms, Muslims have to accept the co-existence of different Islamic traditions. This requires them to reconstruct their concept of *ummah* (global Muslim community of believers) from an Islamic viewpoint, rather than a national or ethnic one. Hence, many of these Muslims have re-discovered the 'practical side' of the *ummah* through the hardship and displacement that the act of migration involves.

The Muslim Community of Northern Ireland

The absence of previous studies on Muslims in Northern Ireland (seen as an *ummah* instead of along national or ethnic affiliation) has made it difficult to determine the history of this small Islamic community inserted into this 'troubled' territory. Until the two terrorist attacks of September 11, the local

press did not show interest in the presence of this community. Due to this lack of information, it was assumed that Muslims living in Northern Ireland were part of a recent migration. They are not. They are a well-established community with a history, although only few people in Northern Ireland know it. It is a history without archives and documents and, as many other histories of 'religious' minorities, deals with myth. Thus, my research has been based on intensive interviews with members of the community, and in particular members of the Belfast Islamic Centre, through which it was possible to understand how Muslims reached Northern Ireland and how, at a certain point in time, they re-discovered their membership of the *ummah*.

It is difficult to estimate accurately how large the Muslim community in Northern Ireland is. According to the president of the Belfast mosque and Islamic cultural centre, the number of Muslims in Northern Ireland might have reached 4000 members (2000 of whom are registered with the mosque). In fact, at the beginning of my research in Northern Ireland, the Northern Irish Statistics and Research Agency acknowledged that only 997 Muslims were living in Northern Ireland – a figure based on the Agency's estimates as the 1991 Census did not include a question directly related to religion. The 2001 Census, in which a specific question concerning religious affiliations was proposed for the first time (but was not compulsory), has shown that Muslims in Northern Ireland number 1943; consequently, they are the largest non-Christian religious community in the region. Although Belfast is the area of major concentration (727 according to the census), Muslims could be found in many other Northern Irish cities and towns, such as Castlereagh (159), Craigavon (149), North Down (132), Newtownabbey (103) Ballymena (67) and Derry (60).

Muslims arrived for the first time in Ireland around 1780 as members of the East India Company. At the beginning of

the nineteenth century, they settled in the cosmopolitan city of Cork. One of these first Muslims married an Irish woman from Belfast and moved there. The Muslim presence was increasing, when in 1920 the Government of Ireland Act established Northern Ireland as a separate political unit. This caused deterioration in the relationship between Dublin and London when, in the 1930s, Valera's Fianna Fáil (FF) government started a trade war. Many Muslims became very concerned about the political situation in the region and decided to move to England, where they had relatives or friends. However, in Ballymena, some Indians had developed businesses and decided to stay. Indeed, these first Muslim immigrants did not try to organize an *ummah* by building mosques or setting up prayer rooms. For a long time they saw their migration to Northern Ireland as temporary because their goal was to move back to England. For this reason, many Muslims kept strong linkages with family members living in English cities. However, these contacts actually stimulated further immigrations instead of a return because of the opportunity Northern Ireland's economy gave them. This process is still active within the growing Bangladeshi community in Northern Ireland.

During the 1950s, Muslims coming from the Middle East joined the Indians and Pakistanis, who were predominant at that time. In the majority of cases, these Arabs were students who were studying at Queen's University, Belfast. When they arrived, they did not have any idea of the tensions that were growing in Northern Ireland. In 1953, Muslims from several different countries, prayed together in a private flat to celebrate the *id-al-fitr* (the end of Ramadan). *Id-al-fitr* is not only a religious rite marking the end of Ramadan and *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca), it is when Muslims hope for Allah's forgiveness, it is a symbol of unity, and finally it is an emotional experience. For Muslims in Northern Ireland at that time, it was particularly an emotional experience. In fact, according to those people

who took part in the ceremony, this was the first time that Muslims in Northern Ireland had prayed communally to celebrate an Islamic festival. This event should be linked to the political and sectarian tensions which were rising within the region. The tensions resulted in the so-called Irish Republican Army (IRA) 'border campaign' and, a few years later, in violent terrorist activities between the paramilitary factions. It is interesting to note that Muslims in Northern Ireland, for the first time, felt the need for a community to provide them with a special and different status from that of Northern Irish Roman Catholics and Protestants. Yet this re-discovery of unity – what I could call the 'emotion of the *ummah*' – started the need for an Islamic place in Northern Ireland.

By the 1960s, the weekly Friday congregational prayers (*salat al-jumma*) and sermon were being performed in the same private flat. Since the members of the congregation were increasing considerably, in 1972 they set up the 'Islamic Society of Northern Ireland' (ISNI), which, among other activities, collected funds to build a mosque. In anticipation of the mosque, the members of ISNI had to hold their meetings in the building of Queen's University Students Union. Finally, in 1979 they bought a flat in South Belfast and turned it into a mosque and Islamic Centre.

The people attending the Friday *jumma* congregation increased to such a level that the prayer room in the flat was unable to accommodate the worshippers. The need for a new place was evident. In 1985, with the funds collected and a donation from Dublin Islamic Centre, Muslims bought a semi-detached house at Wellington Park, close to the flat, which became, and still is, the home of the Belfast Islamic Centre (BIC). The only sign that distinguishes this house from the others around it is the green-white insignia reading 'The Belfast Islamic centre', written in English and Arabic. For the Muslims, the Islamic Cultural Centre and its mosque have become the symbol of the unity of the Northern Irish *ummah*.

Whether Shi'a or Sunni, Arab and Pakistani, Indonesian and Malaysian, Moroccan and Algerian, Indian and Afghan Muslims are sharing the same mosque and social-political community space. Wishing to avoid becoming embodied in the Nationalist-Loyalist dispute, the Muslim community in Northern Ireland seek to 'cancel' their ethnic identities by speaking English rather than their national languages or dialects. Thus, English becomes their symbol of integration into a wider community, while at the same time minimizing the risk of being stereotyped (Marranci, 2003). Hence, Muslims in Northern Ireland show some important differences in comparison to other, better-studied, Muslim communities in Britain and Europe (see for instance Werbner, 2002; Nonneman *et al.*, 1997; Lewis, 1994; Nielsen, 1992).

The Northern Irish 'peace process' has facilitated a political interest in the presence of local ethnic minorities. The Muslims are no longer a hidden and 'underground' part of society, but part of Northern Irish every-day life. Muslims have participated in multi-faith organizations and opened the door of their mosque to schools, authorities, as well as to journalists. To involve ethnic minorities in the construction of a 'new Northern Ireland', the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFNDFM) offered grants to ethnic minority associations and charities. The BIC used the funds to advertise two posts: a Secretary and a Director for the centre. Relations with the wider Northern Irish society had been for a long time constantly improving and developing. However, in a stroke, September 11 caused the Muslim community to feel vulnerable again.

Creating Islamic spaces in a sectarian environment

Muslims living in Northern Ireland established the BIC because of their Islamic needs. However, paramilitary terrorist actions and the socio-political divisions convinced the Muslim community to keep a low profile.

As the white semi-detached house in which they organized the BIC is no different from other anonymous semi-detached houses of the neighbourhood (see figure 2), they could remove the green-white insignia reading 'The Belfast Islamic Centre' and easily conceal the Islamic function of the building. This happened after September 11.



Figure 2. The Belfast Islamic Centre and mosque.

Internally, the BIC has undergone functional and spatial transformations. The rooms of the house have taken on new functions and meanings. On entering the BIC, the visitor finds a corridor divided in two parts by the different colours of the carpet. The grey carpet in contrast to the pale-blue carpet marks the limit in which people can remain with their shoes on. As a mark of respect on entering the sacral space, people leave their shoes on two ranks on the right and left of the entrance; many women take their shoes with them to the women's prayer room. On the ground floor there are four rooms: one is occupied by the BIC President's office, the other is used as library, and at the end of the corridor are located the women's prayer hall, as well as the women's and men's toilets. A kitchen is accessible from the President's office, and intercommunicates with the area in which Muslims perform *wudu'* (ritual ablutions), a compulsory religious practice prior to prayer. The increasing number of

people using the mosque has forced the members of BIC to remove the table and the chairs in the library in order to increase the floor space for praying. In the small prayer room used by women there are some Islamic books, several copies of the *Qur'an* wrapped in coloured headscarves, a table and some chairs, which are moved to one side during prayers. The corridor leads to the stairs. On the first floor, where the men's main prayer room is located, there are three charity boxes used to raise money for community welfare functions such as the Islamic school (religious classes run for children), *zakāt* (obligatory alms-giving), and for building the proposed new mosque.

The main prayer room can accommodate about one hundred worshippers. From the position of the three doors opening onto the landing, it is possible to understand how the original three small bedrooms were transformed into the pray room by removing the partition walls. The wallpaper of the main room is the same pale-blue colour as the carpet. The room lacks Islamic decorations; only a big photo of Mecca (the holiest city in Islam) in a white frame hangs from the wall opposite the *mihrab* (the niche indicating the direction of prayer). This is another visible modification to the building, and indeed, it is the most Islamically marked. However, it is a simple white niche without any calligraphy or Islamic decoration; and there is no *minbar* (a raised platform from which the sermon is given), which is common in the majority of central mosques in Europe. Opposite the prayer room door hangs a timetable indicating the five times for prayer, showing five little cartoon clocks whose hands point to the correct prayer schedule. The names of the prayers are in Arabic; yet it is the only Arabic present in the room. Another kitchen is located on the second floor, connected with a secondary prayer room. There are also three bedrooms for guests visiting the BIC. The loudspeakers in the rooms and in the corridor permit the congregation to follow the prayers and sermon throughout the premises.

In the main prayer room, worshippers pray facing directly the *mihṛāb* forming perpendicular lines. However, because of the different orientation of the other rooms and the fact that some have to pray on the stairs, the observer has the impression that people are praying facing different directions. This illusion of poly-directional *mihṛāb* is something that some Muslims in Northern Ireland dislike. Ahmad, a twenty-nine year-old Algerian Muslim emphasized:

It gives the impression that we are praying in different directions. I know that this is not the case. Yet if we could have a proper mosque, we may feel more united. I think that this is one of the most important things of our prayer: to stay shoulder to shoulder, to move together facing the *mihṛāb*.

However, what surprised me was the absence of Islamic symbols and decorations, as well as a *minbar* (although simple) and a decorated *mihṛāb*, contrary to the importance of these features and symbols in diasporic Muslim places of worship (Metcalf, 1996). The almost total absence of these symbols requires a closer examination, particularly because, as will be shown, members of the Muslim community have a strong propensity to decorate the interior of their houses with Islamic memorabilia and elaborate Arabic calligraphic verses from the *Qur'an*.

Northern Ireland and Its 'Symbol-phagy' Attitude

In order to understand the reason for the absence of religious symbolism in the BIC mosque it was important to question the mosque committee, as well as place these actions within the larger Northern Irish context. According to one Pakistani worshipper:

Islam does not need walls, Islam does not need decorations, and Islam does not need minarets. Islam needs your heart; you build your mosque through your *salāt* [the Muslim prayer].

This spiritual interpretation of the spatial, rather than formal, definition of a mosque

is a commonly held view amongst Muslims (see, for instance, Qureshi, 1996). However, this interpretation did not explain why the Muslim community had made a conscious decision not to display Islamic symbols on the BIC's interior or exterior. It is interesting to compare the BIC with the proposed mosque that Muslims living in Northern Ireland have envisioned as their ideal place of worship (see figure 3). From the beginning of the organization of the Northern Irish Muslim *ummah*, the ideal mosque was to be modelled according to stereotypical Middle East mosque styles, a trend similar to those discussed by Haider (1996) and Khalidi (2000) in North America. So, what has stopped them from building their 'imagined' mosque? Initially, it was assumed that financial obstacles may have been the cause. However, during my fieldwork it was found that an institution based in Saudi Arabia and the

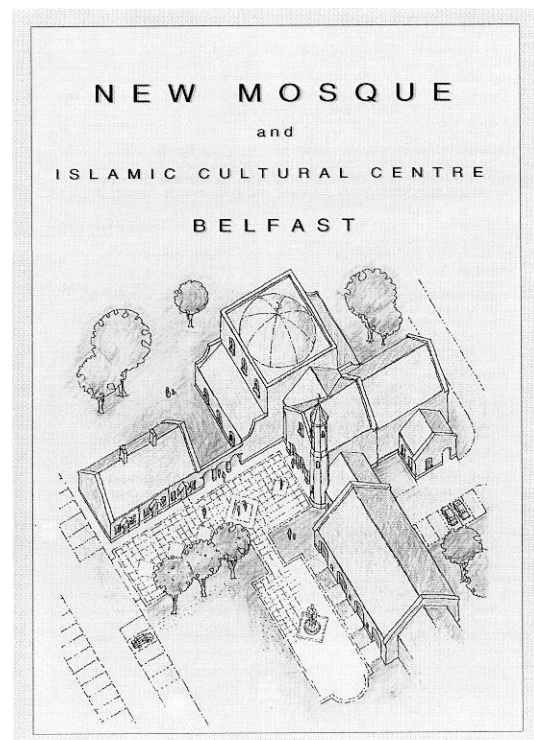


Figure 3. Drawings of the proposed purpose-built Belfast mosque.

Dublin Islamic Centre could have provided the necessary funds. Hence, something more complex is underpinning the slow realization of these plans, a factor which may have also had the effect of leaving the BIC's façade and rooms Islamically bare.

It is arguable that the answer lies in what I refer to as 'symbol-phagy'; a term constructed from the two ancient Greek words, 'symbol' and 'phagos' (meaning to absorb) (Marranci, 2003). 'Symbol-phagy' is a characteristic of Northern Irish society; the tendency to transform any event, object, or cultural item to a symbol suitable for the Northern Irish conflict. Symbols are important, emotion-provoking, multi-meaning, and (sometimes) dangerous since sectarianism is mainly based on stereotypes that help people to create 'real' imagined borders. In Northern Ireland, stereotypes are communicated through symbols (Buckley, 1998) which become 'real' representations of the 'other' i.e., Protestant or Catholic groups. Any ethnic characteristic, symbol, famous personage, flag, conflict, or language, may be transformed into a sign of the hard confrontation between these two main Northern Irish communities. According to Buckley (1998, p. 2), 'symbolism in Northern Ireland is often a serious business some [symbols] have been the occasion for self-sacrifice or murder'. He demonstrates how an exhibition held in 1994 entitled *Symbols* presented religious symbols and sectarian banners that had important roles in the 'Troubles' and which contained other kinds of symbols whose political impact and local significance was less obvious to non-local visitors, but not *less powerful* for the Northern Irish people (Buckley, 1998, p. 1). The reason according to Buckley (1998, p. 3) is that:

the symbolic picture, the symbolic wall, the symbolic ship, the symbolic ring gain their meanings through having been set aside. *Symbolic objects have been bracketed off from ordinary objects.*[emphasis added]

This process of selection, isolation, and modification of symbols characterizes

Northern Ireland as a place in which it is difficult to move within symbolic spaces. One striking example of the ability of the Northern Irish communities to absorb symbols was expressed a few days after a Palestinian suicide bomber had killed several young people in Israel in July 2002. Normally, the main Protestant areas attach British and Loyalist flags to the street lamps. However, on this particular occasion the Loyalists during the night had replaced the British flags with the Israeli flags. On querying Loyalist actions and the widespread replacement of flags in all the Protestant areas, I was told:

You know that Palestinian suicide bombers are killing people in Israel. Palestinians are terrorists as much Nationalists and the IRA. We are resisting terrorism as the people of Israel are doing. The history of Israel is our history; their problems are our problems; thus, the Israeli flag is our flag now.

Loyalists show no allegiance to Israel or Judaism since many of them have anti-Semitic feelings. Notwithstanding, the Israeli flag has become a useful symbol in their political discourse. Nearby, in one of the Catholic neighbourhoods, Nationalists had similarly adorned their streets with new flags; of course, the Palestinian flag. Nationalists wanted to emphasize that the Palestinian resistance against Israeli occupation symbolized the struggle against the British occupation of Northern Ireland (see figure 4). For many members of the Muslim community, these actions raise concerns, particularly in the case of the proposed new mosque project.

Today, the BIC cannot spatially accommodate the Muslim community within the confines of the semi-detached house. At its fullest capacity, the BIC can accommodate up to three hundred worshippers, although the structure of the building has not been designed for such numbers. Thus, during the two major Islamic festivals; '*id-al-fitr* (the end of Ramadan) and '*id-al-adha* (the feast of Isaac's sacrifice), the BIC hires a gymnasium at one of the two sports facilities in Belfast. Approximately seven hundred Muslims



Figure 4. Mural in support of the Palestinian cause in Falls Road, Belfast.

attend these events each year. As a space, the gymnasium is sufficiently large, however, as an environment for prayer, the hard, cold floor is not conducive to prostration and bare feet and so causes discomfort amongst worshippers (see figure 5). The poor sound-proofing also creates echoes of children, women and men's voices resulting in noise-levels which, despite the loud-speakers, drown the sermon making it hardly audible. Moreover, in order to perform *wudu'* (ritual ablutions), Muslims have to share the gymnasium showers with other users whose nudity (even of the same gender) is offensive as it contrary to Islamic principles. Thus, the construction of a new mosque has become a necessity. Although, it is arguable that for a long period of time, the Muslims of Northern Ireland have found their Islamic environment not only in the BIC, which is seen mainly as a political symbol of the unity of the Northern Irish Muslim *ummah*, but within the walls of their homes.

Religious Meanings in Domestic Space

Home has a strong symbolic reference (Després, 1991; Benjamin, 1995) in particular for immigrants (Joy and Dholakia, 1992). Among the different functions that home could have, the religious one is, for

instance, clearly present among the Jewish communities, where the home becomes part of the religious holy space and part of worship (De Lange, 2000). As for Muslims, home has a gendered symbolic meaning, which is also reflected on to the religious sphere (El-Solh and Mabro, 1994). If for the Muslim men the mosque is the privileged space for worshipping Allah, particularly during Friday *jummah*, home is considered to be the realm of women's devotion. Until recently, many mosques in Europe did not admit women for the Friday *jummah*. Today many apply a more relaxed policy, although the lack of space often becomes the excuse to



Figure 5. Muslims praying in the gymnasium during one of the Islamic festivals.

keep women worshipping at home. However, as I could observe in Belfast, for many Muslims their homes have become a family-religious space that men also increasingly enjoy (Campo, 1991). This is particularly true when the mosque is far from home, or, as in Northern Ireland, the surrounding environment may facilitate a home-mosque conversion.

During my research, I was fortunate to have been invited to the home of one of the Muslim community members. His house was located in a Loyalist part of Belfast. The character of the area was recognizable by the union-jacks that were attached to the lamp-posts; the kerbs were painted red, white and blue; the police station had barred windows and was marked with paint-bombs; a mural of Red Hand Commandos holding rifles decorated the walls, and gangs of hooded youths wandered around. This was clearly an area of tension and conflict. From the outside of his detached house it was impossible to tell its Muslim ownership.

Once inside, I was greeted by my informant and his family in the Muslim tradition. On the walls of the hallway leading to the living room were hung framed Arabic calligraphy works. The living room had a soft grey carpet, cream wallpaper, a settee, two armchairs, and a bookcase with Arabic books and several different Arabic and English copies of the *Qur'an*. Opposite the settee was a fireplace, whose mantelpiece was adorned with three ornamental plates decorated with Arabic words. On one of them was inscribed in elaborate Arabic script an important Islamic phrase: '*bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*' (In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful). A tour of the rest of the house revealed objects and memorabilia with a specifically Islamic tenor. In the master-bedroom, copies of the *Qur'an* were placed on the bed-side tables and a small wall hanging representing the *Ka'aba* (the cube shaped building within the Great Mosque of Mecca).

The time for evening prayer (*maghrib*) arrived and the family prepared to pray

together in one of the rooms. Four *sajjad* (the decorated rugs Muslims use for praying) were laid out next to each other on the floor. Before beginning prayers, the individual members of the family went to the bathroom to perform their *wudu'* (ablutions). The eldest son called the first *adhān* (the call for prayer). One of the *Ka'aba* wall hangings marked the *mihrab* (direction of prayer). On the mantelpiece of the fireplace behind them was a gilded reproduction of an open *Qur'an*. The head of the family stood at the front to lead the prayer. Two prayer lines were created according to Islamic ritual; the male members aligned behind the leader and the females aligned behind them to preserve their respect in prayer. A second *adhān* was called, marking the start of the melodious recitation of the *Qur'an*. Islam was visibly and audibly present in the house in the symbols and verses of the *Qur'an* which acted to bless and protect the family space.

For 25 years this domestic space has been the family 'sanctuary' from a society perceived as dangerous and frightening. The house I visited is characteristic of many other Northern Irish Muslim homes. There is an interesting contrast between the 'Islamically bare' public space of the mosque and the Islamically-marked interior of private homes. Indeed, one explanation is the perception that any display of Islamic symbols within the mosque could endanger the Muslim community, whereas in the private context, the family's religious life is protected. A perception confirmed by one informant who stated: 'this house is my family mosque'. The tension between public and private space has marked the lives of these Muslims. Their Islam has been 'interiorized' by creating a process of physical and meta-physical borders between the a-symbolic Islamic public space, and the over-symbolic private domain.

Domestic space has provided an alternative Islamic environment that corresponds to the BIC. The importance of the BIC as the physical representation of the local *ummah* (global Muslim community of believers)

is recognized by the community. A young Muslim Arab highlighted this point:

The BIC is very important for the life of this community. It is the centre of our *ummah*. But we need something different, something more Islamic. I mean a 'real mosque' with a minaret, and, why not the *adhān* calls from two [external] speakers?

The members of this community want to mark Northern Ireland with a visible and audible Islamic sign such as the new mosque. The reason is founded on their desire to make Islam part of this land. Islam, emphasize the members of the BIC, is a peaceful aspect of Northern Irish society, and the new mosque should represent this.

The New Mosque: Symbol-phagying Muslim Space

The 1998 Good Friday agreement had injected the Northern Irish society with many expectations and hopes for a better life. Muslims in the region shared these expectations and hopes and decided to resume the project of building a 'real' mosque. However, a series of local and international events have jeopardized the project and endangered the Northern Irish *ummah*.

In recent years, the peace process has become something different from what people had hoped. Political and social tensions have challenged the dialogue between the Nationalist and Unionist communities. Consequently, paramilitary activism has increased. Finally, in October 2002, the shared government between Nationalists and Unionists collapsed, virtually signalling the end of the Good Friday Agreement. The local events, however, were not the only ones worrying the Muslim community. The Palestinian *al-Aqsa intifada*, September 11, the Afghan war and the recent 2003 Gulf War have affected their lives. For 30 years, the Muslim community had succeeded in being absorbed into the Northern Irish political-religious turmoil. After these events, however, the Nationalist and Unionist-Loyalist communities started to

'symbol-phagy' Muslim symbols and Muslim space.

In March 2002, the Muslim community realized that life in Northern Ireland might change irremediably. On 27 March the *Ballymena Guardian* ran the headline: 'DUP. Muslim Snub Row'. The article explained how the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) councillor had refused a gift from the Muslim community; a brass replica representing the Islamic designs and Arabic texts inscribed on the doors of the *Ka'aba*. The gift, according to the DUP councillor, showed 'incomprehensible symbols' (in Arabic). Then, he rhetorically asked, 'If a paramilitary group came to us with a gift or request for an exhibition would we accept it?' The following day the same DUP councillor asked a *Belfast Telegraph* journalist another of his rhetorical questions, 'If I walked into Ballymena Council with a barrel-load of sashes or other articles associated with the Orange culture, would I be accepted?' The DUP councillor was comparing the sectarian symbols of Northern Ireland, such as sashes, to the representation of the *Ka'aba* door and its Arabic inscriptions.

However, the political impasse became clearer when the gift was, at first, presented to a councillor from one of the two Nationalist parties, the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party). The Muslims had asked the SDLP councillor to present the gift to Ballymena Council. The gift, therefore, came from the Muslim community through a Nationalist member, which made it less acceptable to the Protestant community. Thus, the Protestant community has increasingly come to see Muslims as allies to the Catholics; in other words 'Catholic Muslims'. This term is based on an old joke initially addressed to Jewish people, but during the 1980s applied to Muslims: one person asked a Muslim man, 'Are you Catholic or Protestant?'. When he answers 'Muslim', the other man asks him, 'Yes, but Catholic Muslim or Protestant Muslim?'. On 12 July 2002, a highly significant day for the

Orange parades in Northern Ireland, a mob of young Loyalists had forced the Palestinian President of the BIC, to leave his home. The President had lived there with his family for many years without any problems. This was the first time a member of the Muslim community had encountered the suffering that many in Northern Ireland had endured.

During the recent Gulf War, the Protestant-Loyalist community seems to have found more evidence to support their allegations that Muslims are supporting the Nationalist-Catholic cause. Indeed, the campaign and marches in support of Palestinian and Iraqi people, in which the BIC took active part included, in the majority of cases, members of Sinn Fein and Catholic organizations (see figure 6). Recently, a group of youths belonging to a Loyalist paramilitary group attacked another Muslim family in Craigavon. During a BBC Northern Ireland interview (10 July 2003) the mother said:

My son walked in and said: 'Mum, are we Prod or are we Catholic?' I said, you are Muslim. And he said 'I know I'm a Muslim, but am I a Prod or am I Catholic?'

Muslims living in Craigavon have attracted attention not exclusively because of this violent attack. Craigavon, in fact, is the place where some members of the local council have strongly opposed the new mosque, proposed to be built in Bleary, near Portadown. The official reasons for this



Figure 6. The anti-Gulf War march organized in Belfast.

opposition were firstly, the place would be unsuitable, and secondly, the mosque would create extra traffic. But, other reasons are that the Protestant councillors have opposed the project. One of them told me that the new mosque had the support of Sinn Fein and that in this way, there is a belief that the Catholics are attempting to 'de-homogenize' the Protestant area by 'infiltrating' it with Muslims.

The Protestant councillor argued that, although he did not like Islam because he considered it a violent religion, the Catholics were using the Muslims by politically supporting the establishment of their mosque and Islamic school. A solution, the councillor suggested, would be to build the mosque in a Catholic area. Despite opposition, at the end of June 2003 the council granted planning permission to build the new mosque on land owned by an old Pakistani man. Notwithstanding this decision, Protestant residents are still showing their concerns and opposition on the basis that a mosque in the neighbourhood would bring Muslims to live there, eventually changing the predominantly Protestant demographic pattern of the area (see figure 7).

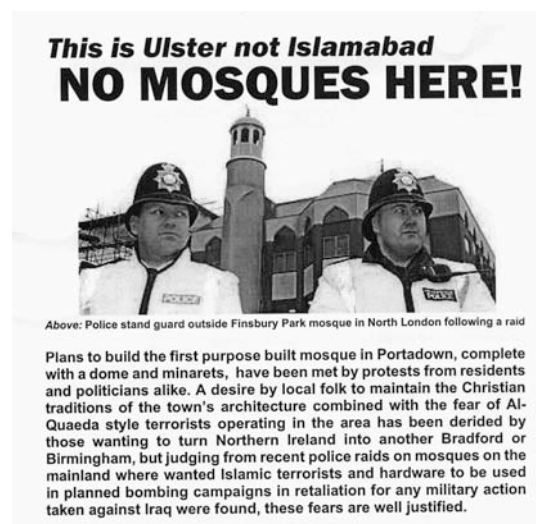


Figure 7. Leaflet showing Protestant opposition to the new mosque.

In Northern Ireland, the minaret, the *adhān*, the dome, Arabic calligraphy, the *mihṛāb*, the *minbar*, are no longer the symbols of Islam. The Northern Irish conflict between the two main Christian communities has *symbol-phagied* the Islamic meanings of these symbols by bracketing off their spiritual values and transforming them into markers of contested Northern Irish places. It has taken the Muslim community 30 years to establish the most important Islamic symbol in Northern Ireland, yet they still face a dangerous situation. The 'imagined' community have a strong desire to manifest their local *ummah* physically so that they can leave a mark of their history on the urban landscape of Northern Ireland. One of the elders said:

I was still a student when we started to organize our Islamic life here in Northern Ireland; now the community is established. But we are still using the semi-detached house. We need a mosque, a clear symbol that can recall our history of immigrant Muslims that became Northern Irish Muslims.

Conclusion

In Islam, the *masjid* (mosque) is not only a place of worship, but also a place of a distinct Muslim identity. The mosque symbolizes the unity of the *ummah*, the physical presence of Islam, the time of prayers and an Islamic way of life. Muslims use the mosque not only for praying but also for celebrating events and their festivals. The *ahadith* (singular *hadith*, the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad) often stress the symbolic relevance of the *masjid*. The Prophet used to build a mosque whenever he reached or visited a new place. The mosque becomes a mark of the presence of Islam, in particular the minaret from which the *adhan* is called.

Muslims living in the West have to adapt to Western time, which is not organized around the five daily prayers, nor the importance of Friday as the holy day. For Muslims, religious adaptation is the norm rather than the exception (Yazbeck, 2002). However, to respect their religion, they often have to seek

permission from non-Muslims; for instance, to extend their ordinary lunch-time in order to attend the Friday *jummah* prayers or to build their mosque.

As in the case of other Muslims living in the West, the Muslims of Northern Ireland have faced local opposition and resistance when they decided to build their mosque. However, if in other contexts Islamophobia has been blamed (see Conway, 1997), this is not the case in Northern Ireland. An analysis of the socio-political and cultural dynamics from which these oppositions started have disclosed a process in which Northern Irish people have 'integrated' Muslims within their sectarian divisions through what I have defined as symbol-phagy.

Although in the future, the Muslim community might decide that it is safer to suspend the mosque project, Islamic symbols, and in particular the mosque, are becoming religiously compulsory for them. These Muslims have a desire to justify their presence in Northern Ireland from an Islamic point of view. The effects of political turmoil in the region has led Muslims to privatize the symbolic discourse of Islam within their homes. The private 'domestic-mosque' is an indication of the lack of Muslim political power in the public sphere, making it difficult to establish Islam in Northern Ireland. The Northern Irish *ummah* has, therefore, decided to face the risk of being involved in the political turmoil, and build their mosque as a challenge to the success of their future in Northern Ireland.

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