

# LESSONS FROM SEVEN SISTERS

JENNY TAYLOR



**DR JENNY TAYLOR** is a journalist and writer, and is currently working as Media Consultant with the Church Mission Society. She has just completed her doctoral thesis entitled *After Secularism: Inner-City Governance and the New Religious Discourse* at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

**JENNY TAYLOR ASSESSES THE LIGHT AND THE DARK SIDES OF MULTI-CULTURALISM FROM HER VANTAGE POINT IN NORTH LONDON.**

Finsbury Park in North London is one of the most diverse places in Britain. If you walk under the seven green bridges that span the Seven Sisters Road, you will find a termite heap of human enterprise which tracks outwards across the globe. The London Council for Hajj and Umrah adjoins Josees Braiding Studio where black women come for “cornbows” and “twists”. You can buy Bulgarian Hot Meze after you’ve had your clothes dry-cleaned by Artemis at KYΠΠΙΑΚΟ ΚΑΘΑΡΙΣΤΗΡΙΟ. If you want a cup of tea, there’s one at John Aladdin’s, the Lebanese teashop where a Cypriot woman calls you darling as she hands you a large mug of brew. Just opposite are the glitzy bridal-wear shops frequented by rich Africans: Fonthill Road is rag trader to the Nexts and what-have-yous of more up-town streets. Evidently less lucrative, but no less intent is the Sudanese Islamic bookshop where you can buy chewing gum and kaftans and books that proclaim *The Myth of the Cross* and *Jesus, A Prophet of Islam*. A serious conversation is going on by the photocopier, where an *ālim* is pointing out passages marked in green highlighter pen in a propped-up Qur’an to a young female inquirer.

This is where my sister comes to buy her *Idh Mubarak* greetings cards. Her husband is from Indian Kashmir and we all try and enter into the festive spirit after the long fast. But when I forget a card, Viki never fails. Viki is from Nigeria and everyone in her part of the world was once Muslim. Viki is our “Mama”. Her parents were Muslim, but she’s warden of St Mark’s Church, Tollington Park. She and Auntie Esther used to look after Lin’s kids at the community playgroup, strapped to their backs. Lin got married in a registry office in Delhi. Two rickshaw wallahs were her witnesses. A house-boatman from Dal Lake with a golden voice and heart-melting good looks, he’s never been out of work of some kind. He sits and makes polite conversation on the sofa with my other brother-in-law, a Scottish Presbyterian Minister, about the relative merits of ... um ... sheep sacrifice. He loves the Christmas Carol Service. My nieces are all named after flowers common to both cultures. Jasmine, Lily and Fazana Rose. We all say “Amen. Bismillah” at the end of grace. Rafiq lets them go to church.

This is the happy side of the Seven Sisters Road. In the other direction is the Finsbury Park Mosque with its hook-shaped crescent moons and its hook-clawed Sheikh, Abu Hamza. Here, if you’re a bloke with a beard, you can go in and sign up for military training. No one tried to shut the ▶



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► sessions down. No one thought too deeply about multiculturalism's shadow side. All we saw, like today, was the children in *shalwar kameez* mucking about, and fathers in bushy beards throwing them up in the air before taking them home for tea.

Islamic scholars, however, justify their presence in the West only by dint of proselytism. We must not be naive about the religious reality that underpins much ethnic migration of all kinds today. Until recently, the West was "the House of War" or unbelief, and there is a well-attested *hadith* that forbids Muslims from living among the infidel. Where they once did, it was through conquest. A new term has been invented to justify economic migration – *Dar ul Dawa* or "House of Mission" – and such a life is now considered especially righteous.

There are parts of Britain where Muslims have consolidated territorially to the point where Philip Lewis, the Bishop of Bradford's adviser on race relations, now advises churches on how to live as a minority in an Islamic community. Islam, given the chance, is exclusive, and the worrying polarisation of communities described in Ted Cantwell's Report for the Home Office *Community Cohesion* is no accident. Cousin marriage perpetuates exclusiveness to a degree that has worried health and social workers in Birmingham. Muslims in Elswick, the poor end of Newcastle, only sell their houses to other Muslims. Lamin Sanneh believes that Saudi Arabia is the root of it: "As long as any part of the Muslim territorial faith flourishes in one sector of our religious universe, it will feed the hope, however vain, of striving for its realisation elsewhere." Islamic territory becomes sacred territory. Jürgen Moltmann recounts (1999: 235) being told by the Archbishop of Canterbury how he had to remove his insignia of office *on the aeroplane* en route to Riyadh (which shows how naive his advisers were). No non-Muslim has ever openly visited Mecca. The Haj may be off-limits for the secular creed but the secular world is not off-limits to their religious creed – and Islamisation is happening in Burnley, Bradford and Rochdale. Churches and heretic mosques have been burned down for years, unremarked by mainstream media, because our society has no categories any more for dealing with *religious* ambition. Secular humanism has no basis for resisting the religiously intolerable, especially when it has an ethnic label. It can only, in the end, coerce the religious mind *en masse*. As Sanneh says: "The greatest challenge for the churches is not living with Muslims as such, but overcoming the obstacles that the modern disaffection with Christianity has thrown up. The secular programme for religious

pluralism has focused primarily on rescinding the claims of Christian uniqueness, a strategy that lowers the threshold for the religious uniqueness represented by other religions, and opens the way for Muslim radicalism" (Sanneh 1998: 65).

Patterns of Muslim settlement in the north of England based themselves around religious symbols and practices – cemented by government policies. John Rex, the influential writer on social policy in the 1970s, advocated "planned segregation". Such communities would, it was believed, phase themselves out, much as the Jewish ghettos of the East End. But this was pious ignorance. Some forms of Islam are attractive to young Muslims *because* of their radicalism. *Deobandi* Islam which grew out of the Indian seminary of Deoband, founded in 1867, was and still is characterised by rejection of the influence of British culture: in India, the Deobandis turned inward, rejecting British language influence on Muslims as *bida* or contamination. The *Deobandi* tradition insists upon a chauvinistic attitude, stressing correct Muslim dress as that which is actually based on subcontinent styles, and on length and styles of beards, correct Islamic manners and customs derived from nineteenth-century Muslim behavior.

The *Tabligh* and *Jama'at-i Islami* groups, also prevalent in Britain, both derive from Deobandi orthodox conservatism. Whereas the *Tabligh* is characterised by the reinforcement of an Islamic lifestyle despite the state – an internal *hijra* or migration – the latter is overtly political. The British Raj fostered their aims for reasons of goodwill and power-broking, but it led eventually to the creation of the Muslim League, and bloody Partition (Kepel 1997: 95). The *Jama'at* founder and ideologue, Seyyid Abul A'La Maududi made credible a hostility to Western secularism and modernism, while using it for his own ends.

Gilles Kepel's book *Allah in the West* chillingly contrasts the failed British "politics of difference" with the more successful French strategy of assimilation and the American "melting pot" based on a strong civil religion. Government strategies here have continually contradicted the desired aim of social cohesion (Kepel 1997: 102 esp. n. 12). Even the *Faith in the City* Report took the secular view: "There are places where Christian service to the community may take the form of helping others to maintain their religious and cultural heritage in freedom and dignity" (para. 3.28).

This sense of the superiority of the secular creed over the religious ignores the Protestant church's unique ability to build communities that are *inclusive* – such as the one in Tollington Park. Meanwhile, Islam fights its way in "using

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any of the weapons of group pride and ethnic assertiveness that come to hand” (Modood 1993: 518). This includes especially the interfaith movement which offers often the only political vehicle available. The Saudi Ambassador Dr Mughram Al-Ghamdi is a member of the Inner Cities Religious Council whose secretariat at the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions is part-funded by the Church. Yet ninety-five per cent of all Muslims in Europe, according to the German scholar Jacques Waardenburg, are “controlled” from overseas in terms of ethnic and national loyalties, family ties and religious obligations (see Waardenburg 1997). Christianity meanwhile is forced to fall back as just one religion among others. The Church reduces itself to the status of an interest group alongside others, according to the Weberian logic of secularisation, risking the complete evacuation of its peculiar sacramental calling that alone can guarantee the survival of a State its doctrine of separation uniquely calls into being (O’Donovan 1996, Chapter 6), and whose multiculturalism it alone can guarantee. ■