

THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN SWANSEA

FACTS AND CHALLENGE

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We called on that area once again; we had visited it in the past and bid it farewell. How can one resist the temptation to return to the place that is home to loved ones who have left their motherlands due to several and intertwined reasons? It is the United Kingdom with its laws and shining currency that have seduced many people to throw themselves on its soil disembarking, ad individuals and groups, throughout the country in which they hoped to find political, economic and scientific conditions better than those in the motherlands that they had to leave at will or forcefully.

You visit it once again, and among the blue eyes and the straight hair you look for other features: brown foreheads that prostrate before Allah and heads that are veiled with chastity and faith.

In Swansea, that town to the south of the kingdom, the meeting took place.

The Name And the Location

People often confuse the names for this country, and frequently make mistakes in using them. United Kingdom, UK, and Britain are

all proper terms for the entire nation, although the term Britain is also often used when talking about the island of Great Britain. The use of the term Great Britain to refer to the entire nation is now outdated; the term Great Britain, properly used, refers only to the island of Great Britain, which does not include Northern Ireland. The term England should never be used to describe Britain, because England is only part of the island.

Size and Borders:

The United Kingdom is a small nation in physical size. At 244,110sq km. the United Kingdom is roughly the size of Oregon or Colorado, or twice the size of New York State.

The United Kingdom is bordered on the south by the English Channel, which separates it from the continent of Europe. It is bordered on the east by the North Sea, and on the west by the Irish Sea, and the Atlantic Ocean. The United Kingdom's only land border with another nation is between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Climate:

The Atlantic Ocean has a significant effect on Britain's climate which is generally mild throughout the year. Temperatures rarely ever exceed 32°C anywhere in the British Isles.

Average annual precipitation is more than 1,000 mm, varying from the extremes of 5,000 mm in the western Highlands of Scotland to less than 500 mm in the driest parts of East Anglia in England. It rains year-round, and in the winter the rain may change to snow particularly in the north.

Population:

Britain has a diverse population that includes people with connections to every continent of the world. The ethnic origins of this population have been complicated by immigration and intermarriage. Britain's predominant historical stock is called Anglo-Saxon. Germanic peoples from Europe – the angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes – arrived in Britain in massive numbers between the 5th

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and 7th centuries ad. Native Britons who survived fled west to the hill country. These refugees and native Britons were Celts.

After the Anglo-Saxon conquest, the Celts remained in Wales, Scotland, Ireland, and the West Country, where Celtic languages are still used to some extent and Celtic culture is still celebrated.

In modern times, large numbers of immigrants from different countries flooded Britain; according to the most recent estimates, based on 1994 statistics, Asian Indians make up 1.5 percent of the British population; Pakistanis, 0.9 percent, Bangladeshis 0.3 percent; Chinese 0.3 percent; Caribbeans 0.08 percent; and Africans 0.03 percent. More than 94 percent of the population is described as white.

Around sixty million people live in the UK nowadays. Despite its relatively small size, Britain is highly populated, with an estimated population density of 244 persons per sq km in 2001.

Britain's population is overwhelmingly urban, with 89.3 percent living in rural areas. Around seven million people live in the capital, London.

Language and Religion:

English is the official language of the United Kingdom, but there are many regional or local accents.

The United Kingdom guarantees its citizens religious freedom without interference from the state or the community, and most of the world's religions have followers in Britain.

The most numerous religious groups are the Protestants, Roman Catholics, Christian Brethren, Orthodox, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons.

The fast-growing Muslim community numbers from 1.5 million to 2 million, or about 3 percent of the total population. Some believe the figure is higher than this. Britain has the second largest Jewish community in Western Europe, with some 285,000 people. There are also about 320,000 Hindus, 400,000 to 500,000 Sikhs, and thousands of Jains and Buddhists. Newer religious movements and

sects have also flourished in Britain, including the Church of Scientology and the Unification Church.

The Important Cities:

London (the capital), Birmingham, Leeds, Glasgow, Sheffield, Edinburgh (the capital of Scotland), Cardiff (the capital of Wales), and Belfast (the capital of Northern Ireland).

Currency:

The Pound sterling (£1), consisting of 100 pence, is the basic unit of currency in Britain (£0.62 equal U.S. \$1; 1996 average). The currency may change in the next few years to the euro.

Industry:

The structure of industry changed substantially in the last half of the 20th century. The coal mining and cotton textile industries declined. As coal production declined, oil production replaced it as a major industry. Motor-vehicle production became a significant part of the industrial base along with communications equipment, including fiber optics, computers, computer-controlled machine tools, and robots.

In 1996 manufacturing accounted for about 21 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP). About 4 million workers, around 20 percent of the workforce, were engaged in manufacturing in 1997.

Agriculture:

Britain's land surface is minimal compared to many other nations, but British agriculture is very intensive and highly productive. In recent decades output has risen steadily, and agricultural labor has become more productive, due to innovations in farm machinery biological engineering of seeds and plants, and the increased use of fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides. Consequently, imports of food, feed, and beverages dropped from 36 percent of total imports in 1955 to 11 percent in 1985, and to 10 percent by 1994. In 1996 agriculture employed approximately 2 percent of

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Britain's workforce and contributed 1.4 percent of its GDP. Fishing is a less vital economic activity, although the industry provides about 54 percent of Britain's fish supplies and involves both deep-sea fishing and fish farming.

Energy:

Britain has more energy resources than any other country in the European Union, mostly in the form of oil and natural gas. Other energy sources include coal and nuclear power. Scotland has some hydroelectric power stations.

Oil was discovered in the North Sea in 1969. By the 1980s it was adding significantly to the British economy as oil exports increased during a period of high oil prices. In 1997 Britain had more than 80 offshore oil fields. In 1996 natural gas accounted for about 25 percent of the fuel consumption in Britain. In 1997 Britain owned 77 offshore fields producing natural gas.

Coal was Britain's traditional source of energy for about 300 years. However, cutbacks in coal production have been severe in the past 20 years. In 1947, when coal mining was nationalized, more than 950 coalmines were operating; by 1996 there were 27 deep mines operating, with a labor force of 12,500. Production in 1999 was 37 million tons. In 1996 coal supplied 44 percent of Britain's total energy needs. Consumption of coal in 1996 was 79 million tons, more than the country produced, so coal imports were substantial.

In 1996 about 3.5 percent of industrial employees were involved in energy production, and the energy sector accounted for 5 percent of the GDP.

Government:

The United Kingdom is a parliamentary monarchy currently headed by Queen Elizabeth II who succeeded to the throne in February 1952 upon the death of her father, George VI. The British monarch, however, has limited powers; the chief executive is the prime minister who heads the executive branch in the House of Commons. Parliament, the legislature, consists of the House of

Lords, the House of Commons, and the monarch, also called the Crown. The prime minister comes from the party that has a majority of seats in the House of Commons.

The most prominent parties are the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, and the Liberal Party in addition to some small parties.

Technology and Education:

Britain has been a world leader in science and technology, and since the Industrial Revolution the nation has been a pioneer in the use of machinery. Britain has more than 90 universities. Students interested in advanced education can also attend polytechnics, which are schools dedicated to the sciences and applied technology. Around 93% of the British students go to public schools that charge no fees; the rest study in independent schools.

Muslims in the United Kingdom:

The Muslim Community in the UK is considered relatively new. Muslims came to Britain in small numbers in the 19th century; most of them came from the subcontinent of India (Pakistan, India and Bangladesh), East Africa and South Africa.

The Yemeni community is regarded as one of the oldest Arab communities in the kingdom. Its members have come to work in the steel and textile industries in the cities of Manchester, Birmingham, Bradford and other towns.

A group of Syrian tradesmen has settled in Manchester before immigrants started to arrive successively from Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Palestine, Lebanon and Tunisia.

Since the middle of the 20th century, the numbers of Muslims have risen; today they make 3% of the total population (around two million people); some believe they are more than this taking into account the Muslims who have become British nationals and the Iraqis who came to Britain following the second Gulf war. Anyhow, Pakistanis, with their different stocks, make the pillar of Muslim immigrants.

Locations:

The Muslims who came to the UK have settled densely in cities. One can see their concentrations in Birmingham, Manchester, Dewsbury, Batley, Liverpool, Cardiff and Glasgow.

The Problems they Encountered:

Muslim immigrants have encountered problems in the British society in the middle of the 20th century as the British did not accept them due to racist reasons. In the seventies and eighties the racist movement was very strong. It was difficult for Muslim women and children to walk in the streets at night. Muslims have resisted those racist sentiments demanding that they be treated as fellow British citizens. One needs to admit that the British authorities have always sought to have Muslims accepted and given their rights in Britain.

Muslims NGOs seek to make Muslims blend in the British society and abide by its laws while observing their particularities as Muslims who have their own faith, customs and traditions.

Between Maintaining Identity and the Threat of Melting:

Muslims face the threat of melting in the British society. All Muslim communities in Europe and America have this problem whose roots are almost identical in all those countries: ignorance of Islamic laws, weakness of religious deterrent, the worldly temptations that attract the youth in particular, and following the western model in eating, drinking customs and behavior.

Muslims have always sought to build mosques, Husseinis, centers and schools in order to protect their children besides being able to observe their religious rituals like the followers of other religions.

Some of the Obstacles that Face them:

Muslims in Britain come from different races, descents and confessions. This makes their unification or meeting under the banner of one Islamic union difficult. That is why the four Muslims who won seats in the House of Commons stood for election via local parties in the kingdom.

Many groups have brought with them their political problems and conflicts from their motherlands, thus making it difficult for them to accord with others, Muslims and non-Muslims.

Besides, some have even committed illegal acts that are in contrast not only with the mores there but also with our Islamic principles and mores.

The term "Islam Phobia" has become familiar to many Britons who have unjustly made a link between Islam, terrorism and the clash of civilizations along with other bad things and images that are echoed in the prejudiced media. Nevertheless, Muslims have been trying to rectify the Britons' view towards Islam and Muslims, holding symposiums, meetings and conferences that are attended by senior officials and prominent cultural, social and political figures, including crown Prince Charles. Muslims have been seeking to have the British authorities recognize Islam as an official religion as is the case in France, Belgium and Spain, besides attempting to put an end to all forms of discrimination against Muslims that are practiced against them by some circles in the British society.

Islamic Schools:

Although there are mosques and Islamic centers in the cities inhabited by large numbers of Muslims, there is only a handful of Islamic schools that do not meet the Muslims' needs. The main problem that these schools face is the high schooling fees especially as they are trying to compete with the British private schools to attract the Muslim students while parents stress on the high level of education.

In The City Of Swansea

Swansea is a city in southern Wales and a seaport on the Tawe River. It is an important industrial center with manufactures that include steel and nonferrous metals and motor-vehicle parts. A large petroleum refinery and chemical works are located in the suburb of Llandarcy. Its industrial growth began in the 18th century, when the port was developed to export the coal mined in southern Wales. The

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town center was destroyed by German bombing during World War II (1939-1945); the city has since been rebuilt and is now considered the second most important city in Wales after Cardiff.

The economic situation in the city; there are no signs of extravagant wealth in Swansea, for its inhabitants are middle-class Britons, except for some families that run the big companies. Most markets are in the town center. Jews control the gold markets.

Muslims from the Khoja group are considered among the wealthiest Muslim classes in the city. The Muslims who come from Bangladesh, owners of Swansea's big restaurants, come next.

Healthcare:

There is a large public hospital in the town center and another one in its northern part; there are also some small private hospitals. Citizens benefit from the healthcare insurance; hospitalization in public hospitals is free and those with low incomes get medicine for free.

Education in Swansea:

Education in this city is free up to age 16; therefore, illiteracy percentage is almost nil except for a few people among the elderly immigrants. Education is free in primary and secondary state schools.

Higher Education:

Swansea has a large university that was established in 1920. The University of Wales – Swansea offers studies in most fields including Engineering, Chemistry, Physics, Biology, Administration, Economics, Languages, etc. A medical studies department has been inaugurated recently. The university, however, is most famous of its engineering specialties for which one of its buildings was allotted.

Muslim's Presence in Swansea:

In the beginning of the 1930s, Muslim families from the Indian subcontinent and some Arab countries arrived in Swansea and resided in its downtown, the center of work, commerce and industry.

Later, as their numbers grew (around 4000 Muslims), they scattered in different parts of Swansea while students resided near the Swansea University.

Their Conditions Before The 1980s:

The families that arrived at the turn of the 20th century did not enjoy high Islamic education and the community members did not take enough interest in observing Islamic rituals and preserving their faith affairs; they mainly focused on improving their living and economic conditions besides assuming some official posts. This was reflected on the next younger generations that suffered from alienation and the loss of identity. Furthermore, one has to remember that missionary activity and minding the Muslims' affairs were very weak, if not absent, at that time. This has made many of them adopt a western lifestyle and abandon their Islamic identity as far as conduct and appearance are concerned.

Islamic Centers in Swansea:

Muslims have sensed the urgent need to establish Islamic center to observe their religious duties just like the followers of other faiths. Therefore, they started establishing mosques and centers. In 1976 the Islamic Center in Swansea was established; the Yemeni community built a small prayer house in 1977; the university's prayer house was founded in 1984; the Pakistani community established a small mosque in 1988; and in 1991 was the establishment of Imam Khoei's Islamic Center in Swansea which we toured and had a meeting in.

At Imam Khoei's Islamic Center in Swansea:

In the town's heart you see Imam Khoei's Islamic Center, with its distinguished building that draws attention, overlooking the city's main square. It had been a church before it was bought and turned into an Islamic center for observing Islamic rituals and marking Islamic occasions besides introducing Islam's rulings to the Muslim

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community members and communicating with non-Muslims on the grounds of dialogue and the Straight Word.

The building has been modernized to meet the Islamic needs and the religious affairs in the area, according to his Eminence Scholar Sayyed Mohammed Saeed al-Khalkhali who received us, along with a number of the community members, and accompanied us in a tour to see the center's departments. The tour was followed by an interesting meeting in the administration office.

On the ground floor there is a large hall for men in which they pray and hold symposiums and meetings on religious occasions. Next to the hall that can take more than 300 people is a kitchen in which food is prepared to be served at those occasions and on social occasions related to the community members.

On the upper floor a smaller hall is allotted for women; it can take 70 women and is equipped with a television for live broadcasting.

The center has a library that includes around 1000 Arabic and English books. One can read these books or borrow them in line with the library regulations. It also has audio-visual tapes of the Holy Quran, religious lectures, and historic speeches. There is also the "side hall" which is rectangular and is used for cultural, educational and entertainment activities.

There is also an apartment in which the center imam resides. Its entrance lies to the left of the building.

The building next to the center has been bought and turned into a school affiliated with Imam Khoei's foundations.

In that small part of the United Kingdom, many questions come to your mind about the members of the Islamic community, their hopes and fears, their ambition and concerns.

Your Eminence Sayyed Khalkhali, how do you evaluate the ties between the center and the community members in Swansea?

Sheikh Qaseem al-Janabi leads the Jamaa prayer(as imam) in the center everyday. Muslims who want to join in can do so. After prayer, they discuss the affairs of their religion; and some Islamic rulings and instructions and explained. There are more worshippers

on Fridays and on Eids. Many of them gather on Thursday nights to recite Duaa Komeil and visit Imam Hussein (as); a session is also held to interpret verses from the Holy Quran. A religious lecture is delivered after Isha prayer on Sunday nights.

There is no doubt that the holy month of Ramadan has a special taste in the countries of expatriation?

There is always a hearty reception by Muslims for the holy month of Ramadan. Here in Swansea, believers come every night to the center where a special program for this blessed month is arranged. On the days and nights of Ashura, majalis Azaa are held to commemorate the Master of Martyrs Imam Hussein, his blessed household and companions who were martyred with him. Muslims massively attend these majalis.

Are women present in all this?

The center has established a women committee that supervises all the women social and cultural activities such as reciting the Holy Quran and the weekly duaas, besides meeting with the center Imam who explains some religious rulings. They also mark some religious occasions.

What about communicating with the non-Muslim other? Are there special programs to introduce Islam to non-Muslims?

We invite some non-Muslims educational and religious foundations from the country to visit the center. Periodical visits are arranged for some British teachers, men and women, to the center to learn about Islam; the numbers of those visitors have been on the rise, so the center allotted Thursdays for such receptions. Those seeking to know the truth of Islam also frequent the center; some of them have already embraced the Islamic faith.

Direct admonition may not appeal to the youth especially as they encounter so many materialistic temptations in the countries of expatriation. Is there a way to attach these young people to the True Religion and enhance their confidence in their Islamic identity?

In truth, what we constantly worry about is preserving the youth getting lost and totally indulging in the western lifestyle. Therefore, we try as much as we can to get them closer to Islam as we help them to be part of the British society without letting this influence their conduct and creed. Besides lessons, symposiums and lectures, we hold discussions, in which the youth take part, about the different aspects of religion and life. In a bid to encourage them to frequent the center, we have established a sports club with the name of the center. The club has played several matches with teams from local schools. Moreover, we have rented a sports hall for men and women. As Muslim women's participation in sports activities increased, the municipality has allotted one day for the center every week. The center, furthermore, arranges social trips on happy occasions and immortal days, in addition, of course, to organizing religious journeys for Hajj, Omra, and visiting holy sites.

What is the role of the center's school in the religious and cultural activities?

The school is open only on Saturdays and Sundays to enable the teenagers and the youth to attend. They are taught Arabic, reciting the Holy Quran and some Islamic concepts to keep them in touch with their religious heritage and mother tongue with the aim of fortifying their thoughts and setting right their behavior. Moreover, we invite some scholars and thinkers to deliver speeches or lectures on Islamic occasions. Besides these general lectures, lessons in Fiqh and ethics are given to those who want to know more about religious affairs.

If it is not possible for people to attend personally to listen and benefit from the religious explanations, are there other ways to deliver the information?

The center answers Fiqh and creed questions that come via telephone or e-mail; we have created a web site that offers religious services in Arabic and English.

Are the center's activities limited to its building or are there ones that are held outside the premises?

The center imam conducts successive visits to other areas such as Cardiff, Bristol, Newport, Carmarthen, Neth, Birmingham and other neighboring cities to communicate with the community members living there, know about their needs and examine their requests. Moreover, the center distributes some Islamic books and booklets to most of the public libraries in Wales to enable Muslims and non-Muslims to learn about the truth of Islam and the greatness of its principles. Besides, lectures are delivered and some publications and important books are distributed at the Swansea University.

The Duality of Death and Life:

Among the difficulties that encounter Muslims in expatriation is performing the ablution and burial of the dead in their own cemeteries. Has the center had a move in this regard?

A place was made for ablution and shrouding of the deceased. It has a private entrance and is regarded as the only place in the country to offer such services to the sect members (followers of the Ahlul-Bait (as) School) who had severe suffering before it was built.

What about marriage contracts?

We conduct marriage contracts and we urge the young men to marry Muslim women. Many of them give the marriage celebration in the center because its halls are spacious enough for this purpose.

We bid his Eminence Sayyed al-Khalkhali farewell and leave Swansea with a hope to meet the community members in other areas in the United Kingdom, for it will, no doubt, call us for a third time, in Manchester, Birmingham, or in other towns or areas, and we will not be able to resist answering the call.