

In the wake of the London bombings in July 2005, there has been a torrent of books and articles about young Muslims in Britain, a group upon which the media spotlight has been relentless and the reporting often unfair or inaccurate. These two new books, seeking to contribute to this debate, are eagerly and provocatively marketed by the publishers—the cover of Lewis’s book features the image of a young man wrapped in the Union Jack, while Mondal’s has a photograph of Shabina Begum, the school girl who took her case for wearing the jilbab at school to the High Court in 2002.

To some extent both books share some common themes, which will be familiar to many readers. They focus on issues of intergenerational conflict and tension, problems of educational underachievement and social marginalisation (particularly acute for young men), and the gap in accessible religious education and spiritual learning for young British Muslims. Both books are keen to emphasise the diversity of experiences among young British Muslims and to challenge sensationalist concerns about widespread radicalism.

However, there are also important differences between the two books in their structure and approach. The two authors come to their subjects from somewhat different backgrounds. Philip Lewis’s Young, British and Muslim is a sequel to his highly regarded Islamic Britain (2002), one of the most important accounts of issues facing Muslims in contemporary Britain and written out of his longstanding engagement with Christian-Muslim relations in Bradford, where he works as an advisor to Anglican bishops and is a university lecturer. Anshuman Mondal’s Young British Muslim Voices is an opportunity for the author, of part-Muslim heritage but brought up in a middle-class secular family “far removed from the social environments of most young British Muslims” (p. xiii), to talk to young Muslims like those he encounters as a lecturer in literary theory and post-colonial history at Brunel University.

As he reflects in the preface, Lewis’s earlier book was written against a tradition of race and ethnicity theory which did not take religion seriously. In this book, however, his concern is with “the privileging [of]
‘Islam’ as an explanation for quite disparate phenomena, whether riots, disaffected inner-city youth, political radicalization or violent extremism” (p. xiii). He seeks both to emphasise how religious identifications intersect with other identities (ethnic, class, or professional), and to challenge the way that ‘Islamism’ is often presented as an “undifferentiated phenomenon”. He wants non-Muslims to understand, or at least “overhear”, the “anguished and passionate intra-Muslim debates now exercising their communities” (p. xv) as a new generation of young, British-born Muslims consider their role in religious, communal and political/public life. As Lewis explains, the challenges are considerable, and it is important to see them within the context of the dislocations of migration, as a community learns to live as a religious minority within an environment “perceived as either indifferent or hostile” (p. xvi). In particular, he highlights the challenges of developing religious literacy and of producing Muslim leaders who can engage both with a young British-born population and in the secular public sphere.

The first two chapters of Lewis’s book set out the context with an overview of the diversity and dynamics of Britain’s Muslim population. He writes clearly and accessibly, drawing from both academic and media sources (which are well documented at the end of each chapter). I liked the knitting in of examples, such as the biography of Olympic boxer Amir Khan. The comparison between Bradford, Leicester and Brent emphasises the specificity of local geographies against aggregate data which illustrate worrying trends of disadvantage. Lewis shapes his account of intergenerational conflict from a range of sources including novels, mosque sermons and the views of those who work on the Muslim Youth Helpline (MYH). He highlights concerns about drugs, gaps in parental understanding and between madrasa and secular educational spaces, and gender inequalities. He also traces the enduring significance of biradari networks, particularly in marriage patterns. While there is a focus on the challenges, Lewis also wants to showcase the constructive progress being made and the level of debate within Muslim fora. He uses the example of the MYH, who through websites, events and telephone counselling try to provide spaces for young British Muslims to gain a better understanding of how they might participate in British life in ways that are consistent with their faith. This focus on initiatives by young professionals who are seeking to engage with issues by taking a distinctive British Muslim perspective is continued in the next chapter, which profiles the work of City Circle, an influential, London-based debating group with a high web presence, the Muslim newspaper