

DRAFT: Please DO NOT quote without the written authorization of the author.



Faith Ideology and Fear: The Case of Current and Former Muslim Prisoners¹



The British Academy



Carnegie Trust

Dr Gabriele Marranci

University of Aberdeen

Religious Studies

School of Divinity, History & Philosophy

© G. Marranci 2007
(All Rights reserved)

¹ This summary is protected by copyright and any part of it should not be quoted or otherwise used without express permission from the author. The author will take legal action against those who violate copyright.

Before offering a short summary of my recent research and its findings, I wish to express my gratitude to Lord Ahmed of Rotherham, Lord David Ramsbotham for his keynote speech, Mr Salah El-Hassan, director of IQRA Trust, for inviting me and the honourable guests who came here to attend this annual lecture. I thank also Dr Basia Spalek for her stimulating paper which helps me to introduce my argument.

I think that no better time could have been selected to discuss the topic of current and former Muslim prisoners, the challenges they face inside and outside prisons and to address the recurrent question of radicalization within UK prisons. We are on the eve of a political change which sees Mr Gordon Brown becoming Prime Minister tomorrow. I hope that this will be an occasion for a deep reflection on the issue of security policies, which inevitably will regard also the prison system. I shall explain later the reasons for which security policies become central to the overall question of Muslim radicalization within and beyond prison.

Let me introduce, briefly, my study and the reasons for which I decided, in 2003, to pursue it. Being an anthropologist, I shall start with an anecdote which explains two things: how I became interested in the experiences of Muslim prisoners, and my “inside and outside prison” comparative approach. The anecdote, as my research, has its origin in Scotland; in a mosque which, to protect rights of anonymity I cannot not name, but I can say that it was not a small mosque. I was sitting with other Muslims at the back of the mosque during a Friday Prayer chatting, when I noticed, and was not the first time, a twenty-three old man, of Pakistani origin, sitting in the corner alone. Now, it’s quite normal, even with new comers to the mosque or strangers that Muslims around you

exchange salaams. Yet every time this man entered the mosque I had the impression that he could have been a ghost. Nobody acknowledged his presence and he was left alone, as usual, in a corner. I became curious about this man and one day I approached him and, to his great surprise, started to chat about general things. After our chat finished, an elderly and influential member of the mosque committee approached me. ‘Brother’, he told me with an apocalyptic tone of voice, ‘I suggest that you do not befriend that man, he is a bad Muslim and really we do not want him here. He is a criminal, he has spent years in prison and we told him that we do not want to have trouble with the police, but he comes here and we cannot send him away for the jumma prayer, but it is not good for us to have an ex-con here’. I, of course, did exactly the opposite; I spent time with him, and so my research started.

We shall see that this ostracism toward former Muslim prisoners is not uncommon, and I can tell you that the majority of the Muslim community has little or no understanding, beyond the classic stereotypes, of what prison is and its function. There is another element, which is extremely relevant to what I am going to say below. The wider Muslim community is in a form of denial as far as the increasing number of young British Muslims who experience the traumatic event of entering prison for the first time. I came across this denial many times during my research. In one case, in an area of Birmingham where there was a considerably high number of young Muslims in prison, I was reassured by one of the mosques in the most affected area that there were none of their brothers in prison because they were good Muslims, and only the bad ones end in prison.

These preliminary observations brought me to develop a four-year project, which was funded by the British Academy, The University of Aberdeen, and the Carnegie Trust for

Scotland. I wish to express here all my gratitude to the Scottish and in particular the English and Welsh HM Prison Service, for their incredible support, the governors of the prisons visited for the incredible access that they have granted to me, and the chaplains, in particular the Muslims, who have devoted their precious time to my research and provided more support than I could ever expect. My particular and deep thanks, however, go to Mr Peter Windsor without whom I would not be here in front of you providing my contribution through my research. Indeed, I have to explain that as an anthropologist, and being the research based on fieldwork, I needed a higher level of access to the establishments than other research conducted previously.

The Research and its Methodology

The research has been conducted through participant observation, both within and outside prisons. This means that I have not only conducted an overall 130 interviews with Muslim prisoners, and about 45 interviews with former Muslim prisoners (25 in Scotland) and their families, but also spent time with the prisoners and former prisoners and have been directly involved in their lives. In the case of Muslim prisoners, this has meant taking part in Islamic teachings, Friday prayers, observing imams' activities, and spending time with the prisoners in their cells and during their association time. Sometimes I have spent more than 10 hours within a prison. As far as former prisoners are concerned, this has also included living for a short time with the families of former prisoners and following the life of their children when released from the prison. I have immense gratitude to my informants (and now some friends) for sharing with me their lives.

During this research, I have visited all the existing categories of prisons, including one female prison. The majority of the prisoners interviewed were of South Asian origin (80%) in particular Pakistani, only 5% were converts to Islam of white British origin. The overall majority of the South Asians were second generation. In England and Wales, at the beginning of my research the total prison population was 74,962, yet in 2006 it reached 77,058 prisoners. Despite the general increase, Muslim prisoners jumped from 6,924 (9.2%) to 8,012 (10.4%) prisoners, an unprecedented increase of 1.2%. The increase is particularly worrying as far as young offenders are concerned. Yet from the Census 2001 data, it is not difficult to see the reason behind such an increase. The most recent publication provided by the Home Office concerning religion in prison in England and Wales has been published in 2000, yet the majority of the Muslim prisoners I have interviewed had committed drug related offences, some of which were linked to gang crimes (particularly among young offenders).

At the centre of the official experience of Islam in Prison there is the prison imam. Although some prison imams seem still to need specific training which helps them to understand the challenges that they can face in guiding and offering pastoral care to prisoners, I have observed very good practices and professionalism among them. The prison imams face two main challenges: A) Since the Muslim chaplains are issued with the prison keys, Muslim prisoners perceive them as an ambivalent figure, on the one hand, as a spiritual support but on the other also as a prison officer, a person who is 'doing his job'. B) Muslim chaplains are often represented by the mass media as the ultimate 'radicalizer'.

During my research I have found no evidence to suggest that the Muslim chaplains are behaving or preaching in a way that facilitates radicalization. On the contrary, my

research findings suggest that Muslim chaplains are extremely important in preventing dangerous forms of extremism. Though, the distrust that they face, both internally and externally, jeopardize their important function. My findings have highlighted that the work of some Muslim chaplains is affected by the concern, if not the fear, of being accused of 'radicalizing' Muslim inmates. This reduces the capacity of the Muslim chaplains to address important issues in the attempt to educate Muslim prisoners to dialogue, debate and a non essentialist interpretation of Islam. This issue has facilitated the practice of Muslim prisoner peer-to-peer teaching of Islam and the formation of 'leaders' within the 'prison ummah'. Consequentially, Muslim prisoners with strong views of Islam and an essentialist interpretation tend not to recognize the authority of the imam and engage as less as possible in activity, other than as an observer.

Identity and Prison

One of the main questions that now probably you would wish to ask is how strong views of Islam and processes of radicalization may develop within prison. It is important here to address four misleading, but rather common, understandings of radicalization. I have reached these conclusions after long years of study of identity. First of all, radicalization is not a disease, a kind of contagious virus affecting people, so that entering into contact with a radical Muslim (or non-Muslim, for that matter) induces radicalization in others.

Radicalization, any form of radicalization, is a multi-sided process. Secondly, no cultural object (book, TV program, and so on) can radicalize a person through exposure; people use cultural objects and not vice-versa. Thirdly, although obvious to the degree of the

ridiculous but nonetheless commonly forgotten, the radicalization of Muslims is a tiny percent of the overall essentialism and radicalization which is affecting the world today. Yet today, it produces the best economic advantages to its exploiters (both pro and anti radicalism). Finally, recent studies in psychology and neuro-psychology, as well as my observation, have demonstrated that the process of 'radicalization' can develop even in isolation. In other words, you do not need a group. So, from where do people derive, at the basic level, the elements for their radicalization? The answer is, from the process which forms their identity.

In my theory of identity, which I have developed in my recent book *Jihad Beyond Islam*, published by Berg, I have explained that identity is a process with two functions. On the one hand, it allows human beings to make sense of their autobiographical self, and on the other it allows them to express the autobiographical self through symbols. These symbols communicate the personal feelings that, otherwise, could not be externally communicated. Hence, I have concluded that it is what we feel to be that determines our personal identity. So the statement 'I am Muslim' of a hypothetical Mr Hussein is nothing else than the symbolic communication of his emotional commitment through which he experiences his autobiographical self. In other words, Mr Hussein has an autobiographical self of which he makes sense through that delicately shaped machinery of his imagination called identity, and which he communicates with the symbolic expression, which is an emotional commitment, 'I am Muslim'. This has important consequences on the experience of Islam in prison, in particular for the kind of Muslims who, unfortunately, end in prison.

The majority of Muslim prisoners have rediscovered Islam within prison. During my research I have found a constant similarity among the personal stories of the prisoners.

Being second generation and born into a religious family, the majority of Muslim prisoners attend until their teenage years the madrassa (school within the mosque) where they were taught to recite the Qur'an, without any real explanation. Often the language of the community, in particular Urdu, was used. Alienated by the mosque environment and not fully understood by their own parents, upon reaching their teenage years the Muslim prisoners started to follow friends and 'become lost'. When arrested, they start to reconsider their life and link their experience of prison not to human punishment but to an opportunity granted by Allah to change their life.

The majority of Muslims in prison feel strongly to be Muslim, even when their own actions do not match the expectations of what is assumed to be Muslim. Indeed, my research suggests that we have to distinguish between Islam as an 'act of identity' and Islam as an 'act of faith'. Muslims in prison, during my research, have shown to see Islam more as an act of identity rather than of faith. The act of identity is used to re-establish equilibrium within the autobiographical self and the surrounding environment. Prisoners in general, because of the prison environment and the small community in which they live, develop a strong viewpoint. I have observed this in many different aspects: discussing football, politics, food, and, of course, Islam. Muslim prisoners are not an exception and some of them tend to develop an essentialist view of Islam based on a radical dualism: Islamic versus non-Islamic.

The relationship between environment and the increase in the prisoners' radical dualism concerning Islam have been confirmed when security within prison is increased towards the Muslim population because of the fear, often increased by mass media stereotypes, that they are radicalizing through cultural objects or personal contacts with

other inmates. It is important to note here that singling out security policies, or security policies which indirectly provide a ‘political status’ to the Muslim prisoners with strong views of Islam may achieved opposite results, increasing the process of radicalization and increasing the risk of extremism when the prisoner is released from prison. Indeed, in these cases, some Muslim prisoners ended developing a process of radical dualism. The first part of Muslim profession of faith *La illah la-illallah* (there is no other god than Allah,) becomes at the same time the profession of a unique and superior identity.

Muslim prisoners should be educated to the dialogue, to accept that there are differences in the understanding of Islam and there is space for democratic criticism and protest. Yet the fear of being repressed and punished for the ideas and feelings that Muslim prisoners experience have pushed them toward secrecy, distrust of the democratic debate and reinforced the widely shared beliefs that Islam is under attack. Indeed, Muslim prisoners, and I can say the wider Muslim community, can see that radicalism and extremism, mainly produced by intolerance and our fast way of living and taking decisions, is flourishing in many aspects of our ordinary life. Yet only Islamic extremism, though responsible for less killings than other forms of extreme violence such as gang culture, is singled out as endangering our security.

Hence, my findings strongly suggest that a real and useful effort to tackle the risk of radicalization within prison (but I can say the same as far as outside prison) are security policies which, rejecting the lucrative and easy selling direct equivalence between the word extremism and Islam, address radicalism as an encompassing strategy against “intolerance”. And indeed, it is within the wide umbrella of fighting and preventing intolerance that radicalization of Muslims can be addressed. Intolerance towards the Other can be caused by

ignorance and fear. So, to have a strong Islamic identity *does not mean, automatically, to be a dangerous extremist*. Yet in some establishments, and some prison officers, tend to reach the conclusion that a strong Islamic identity expressed through strong religious commitments to Islamic rituals and styles mean that the prisoner is becoming an extremist. This, of course, is not the case. It is important that personal identities are respected exactly to avoid that the sense of disrespect suffered by the religious prisoners facilitate the passage from a strong Islamic identity to a more borderline ideology of Islam.

Islam as ideology within prison

My findings have suggested that Islam in prison can be experienced as an act of faith or an act of identity or a mix of the two. Some of the Muslim prisoners for whom Islam is primarily an act of identity develop essentialist views of Islam based on a radical dualism. Yet even when Islam is experienced as primarily an act of identity it does not mean that the Muslim prisoner is becoming radical or extreme. Some Muslim prisoners who experience Islam as only an act of identity can form what I call an ideology of Islam. The prison environment, with its restrictions and power-based relationships is conducive to the formation of such ideologies. This affects not just Muslim prisoners but also other prisoners and prison staff in general.

What I have called 'the ideology of Islam' within prison is extremely reinforced, if not induced in certain individuals, by the current general representation of Islam as an antagonistic, dangerous, threatening force within the country and the west, as often portrayed by the mass media and politicians. Indeed, news programs, articles of journals

and politicians' speeches which, of course, are accessible within prisons have a double effect. On the one hand, the stereotypes concerning Islam, Muslims and terrorism make the life of Muslim prisoners more difficult and increases the sense of isolation and being part of a 'special persecuted group'. On the other, for a small minority of Muslim prisoners, the over-focus and attention that Islamic terrorism receives and the overall continuous discussion of Islamic extremism, reinforces their views that they are part of a struggle between cultures, in which of course, the Islamic one is superior.

The Muslim prisoners who develop a strong ideology of Islam tend to isolate and disengage from the prison, including not recognizing the authority of the imams. Some of these Muslim prisoners try to achieve a charismatic role and be recognized as leaders from not only the other Muslim prisoners but also possibly members of staff. The main element of this 'ideology of Islam' is the idea of justice. Justice is divided in two, the human and the divine, with the latter being ultimate and superior. A minority of Muslim prisoners reject, through the ideology of Islam, non-Muslim justice as a corruption and see themselves as engaged in a sort of mission. They try to make sense of their being in prison through religion. Some of them see their experience of prison as a mission sent by Allah to resist the unjust human justice and affirm what they think is 'Allah's justice'.

This means that some Muslim prisoners can start to form strong views of Islam and enter into an extreme ideological understanding of Islam, not because of indoctrination or because of particular readings or external influences, but as a form of denial of their criminal status; a denial which can also be observed among other prisoners of all extractions and backgrounds.

Former Muslims Prisoners' Vulnerability to Extremists' Recruitment

At the beginning of this paper, we have seen how many former Muslim prisoners suffer from a serious ostracism from their Muslim community, and sometimes from their own families, thus increasing their isolation. In certain cases, the Muslim prisoner is inevitably reintroduced into the same criminal environment which had caused the original offences, because of the lack of support. Yet certain former Muslim prisoners go back to this criminal environment having acquired what I have called an ideology of Islam and experienced Islam as an act of identity. This can, of course, create new scenarios within the criminal environment in itself.

My findings suggest that former Muslim prisoners receive less support than non-Muslims, in particular as far as accommodation, probation and help in reintegration within the community. Mosques and Islamic institutes are highly unprepared to offer support to former Muslim prisoners, with the Muslim community partially in a sort of denial as far as the issue of what they are facing as far as the increase of Muslims in prison is concerned. The pressure produced by the current social political post 9/11 reality, has brought some Mosques to reject former Muslim prisoners, because of the fear that they can attract unwanted attention. The fear that the mosque could be accused of extremism and closed has increased their suspicion towards former Muslim prisoners. This has the dangerous effect of isolating the former Muslim prisoners, and among them those who have developed an ideology of Islam.

Some of the former Muslim prisoners have built up, like other prisoners, anger towards the state and community, and perceive themselves as victims of a persecutory

system. Due to the political and social situation which Muslims in general face today, it is easy that former Muslim prisoners link their own reality to the global difficulties and suffering that Muslims face in the contemporary world. Former young Muslim offenders are particularly vulnerable to recommit crimes and return to prison. Yet among some of them, the experience of prison and the experience of Islam as an act of identity can modify how the criminal activity is interpreted.

During my research, I have observed an ongoing project which is in the right direction. HMP Leeds has started, in 2005, a Muslim Community Chaplain Project, in which a Muslim imam works as a liaison officer between the prison and the wider community, but especially the Muslim community, in the effort to follow the lives of former Muslim prisoners during resettlement. I strongly suggest that this is the best available solution to avoid the isolation, and its consequences, of former Muslim prisoners.

My observations have suggested that the particular identity processes through which some Muslim prisoners have undergone, and the isolation that many former Muslim prisoners suffer, as I have described in the previous sections, make them extremely vulnerable to extremists' recruitment. The mass media have overemphasized, and politicians overestimated, the danger of extremism within prison as well as the danger of extremists' recruitment within prison, overlooking the real problem: the process of re-integration within society. Although former Muslim prisoners are often under surveillance by our security forces, the isolation they face and the need for support and help, often rejected by mosques and the Muslim community, reinforce in some of them the ideology of Islam and a sense of injustice. The restriction imposed, and self-imposed, in prison on their ability to express views on Islam and political issues have educated the former Muslim

prisoners to a certain ‘underground’ culture and deprives him or her of the capacity of debating ideas openly within a context.

Conclusions

Some former Muslim prisoners, who for the first time feel to be able to express their views, which were limited and restricted within prison, end in developing strong political rhetoric. Even though this rhetoric often remains only rhetoric, it facilitates the possibility that the former young Muslim prisoner may attract the attention of other extremists or put him or herself in contact with certain individuals interested in exploiting his or her vulnerability. The rejection that some former Muslim prisoners suffer forces them to link with other marginalized areas of Islam in the UK. My research and observations suggest that there are single members of dissembled militant organizations, such as Al Muhajiroun and Supporters of Shariah which actively, but without disclosing their previous affiliation, try to target young former Muslim prisoners. I can describe their activity as a form of ‘talent scout’. The majority of former Muslim prisoners, after an initial interest in the rhetoric of Islam expressed by these individuals, and after having been exposed to material coming from Iraq and Afghanistan, which is widely available, become disinterested or do not want to be directly involved. Yet a small minority, which also has developed what I have defined as a strong ideology of Islam, recognizes its own position in the provided propaganda and expresses more interest.