

Title—On British Islam: Religion, Law, & Everyday Practice in Sharia Councils
Author—John Bowen
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Categories: Islam, Colonialism, Britain, Culture, Law

Place: UK

Time: 1940-2010

Argument Synopsis:

Bowen's *On British Islam* provides a study of British Islam with a focus on the issues and practices surrounding sharia. He defines sharia in two ways, meaning both the path God set out for Muslims and a particular set of normative teachings. Bowen strives to look at British Islam through two lenses, one being the everyday practices of Britain's sharia councils. He also asks how and why Muslims created distinctive religious institutions in Britain and what features of the British experience with Islam differentiate it from the experience of other European countries. Bowen chooses to focus on the sharia council system because it represents a prolonged and unique experience in meeting Islamic needs in a Western country, it highlights Britain's specific relation to Islam, and has become a flashpoint in British public debates. Bowen argues that the particular contours of Islam in Britain are strongly influenced by British imperial history. He finds that British Muslims more strongly identified with both their country and their religion when compared to French and German Muslims. An important takeaway for Bowen is that British Muslims are adapting to British ways of life and are in process of creating institutions that make sense in both British and Islamic terms.

The book is organized into four parts, Pathways, Practices, Variants, and Boundaries, which each contain a handful of chapters thematically focused. The first section, Pathways, examines how Muslims came to Britain, settled and developed Islamic spaces and boundaries. In this section Bowen identifies a through line from the colonial period to the present, arguing that in British India colonial rule both validated religious governance of family affairs and drove Islamic leaders to carve out their own spaces of Islamic law and these same logics of religious governance and autonomy continue to govern postcolonial Britain. The second section, Practices, examines the workings of Britain's most extensive sharia council, headquartered in East London with branches across the country. The third section, Variants, asks how practices differ when quite different institutions turn to the field of sharia. Here Bowen demonstrates that each major sharia council in Britain is strongly shaped by its local origins and pathways of development and that this should be seen as instances of institutional adaption. When exploring Birmingham Central Mosque's sharia council where women hold many of the high-level positions, he finds that women are more grounded in setting out to resolve concrete problems, compared to men debating amongst themselves how to best interpret and apply sharia. The final section, Boundaries, is centered on Britain-wide debates about the proper role of religion in law, schools, and public life; these debates include accusations that Islamic institutions are preventing Muslims from fully integrating and fears that English law has 'recognized' sharia.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- British sharia councils are an effort to create, on the basis of remembered social forms but in a new context, mechanisms to respond to British Muslims' demands
- British Islamic life is not the mere transposition to Britain of South Asian practices, but it is filtered through new institutions that are both British and Islamic
- British Islam is fractured, divergent and institutionally creative