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# London answers a deep-felt need

## UK and Europe

**By Zaki Badawi and Salem Azzam**

THE ISLAMIC Cultural Centre in London was established in response to a deeply felt need to have a mosque the capital of a Commonwealth which has more Muslims than Christians. It came into being in 1944 when the Government donated a piece of land in Regent's Park for the purpose.

The centre comprises a mosque, lecture halls, a library, and an administrative section. It caters primarily for the Muslims in London, but also has a certain moral authority throughout Britain, even though there are no parishes of defined boundaries or pyramid-like structure, as in the Christian church. The Central Mosque is first among equals and its views are sought and generally followed by other mosques.

The centre gives religious guidance, supports Muslim education and organises a variety of projects of importance to the Muslim community. One is the project for Muslim schools in Britain, which it is hoped will be established on the same basis as the Jewish and Catholic schools. It also collects alms for distribution to the poor and works in close collaboration with social workers. It also conducts lectures and seminars and takes part in broadcasts on current issues.

Muslims in Britain are estimated to number between 1.5 million and 2 milion. Most have relatives in Asia, but many are from Africa and the Arab world. There is also a growing community of British-born Muslims.

As Muslims they face the strains experienced by every religious community. As they belong to different linguistic, racial, and cultural groups, these strains are comunded with the resulting internal tension. The clash of cultures, Islamic and Western, often assumed to be at the root of the maladjustment of the Muslim youth, is more a clash with the particular heritage than with Islam itself.

Gradually the Muslim community in Britain is losing its geographical, linguistic, and racial identity in a universal Islamic identity, and the centre works to enhance and promote this process. It regards itself as a British institution with a particular relationship to the Muslim community just as Westminster Abbey is a British institution with a particular relationship to the British followers of the Church of England.

Slowly, Britain's Muslim community is settling down to its Britishness. It is perhaps of interest to know there are about 10,000 Muslim doctors in the health service; there are also 20,000 teachers, 5,000 engineers, and 15,000 scientists.

The new century heralds great strides for this community along the road of integration without any loss of identity. Perhaps it is worth noting that a British scientist of Pakistani origin, Professor Abdus Salam of Imperial College was recently awarded the Nobel prize for physics.

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FIVE YEARS ago a number of Muslim organisations in Europe met in London and decided to set up the Islamic Council of Europe. This was a manifestation of their desire to establish their identity and break the Western barriers of prejudice against Islam and the Muslims and build bridges of understanding between them and the West.

Ever since, the council has sought to achieve its twin objectives of projecting Islam to the West and protecting the rights of Muslims throughout the world and giving them a sense of dignity and pride. It has held international conferences, seminars and meetings, and has issued a number of publications and helped to develop institutions like the Islamic Institute of Defence Technology, International Commission on Muslim Minorities, Islamic Secretariat for the Liberation of Muslim Lands, and the Islamic Press Union.

The council's first major international conference was held in London in April, 1976. For the first time in contemporary history Muslim scholars came to the UK from all over the world and spoke on different aspects of the religion and culture of Islam. The West was provided with an historic opportunity to see not only the manifestations of Islamic culture (as displayed in the World of Islam festival of that year) but also know a little more about the ideals, values, and principles of the religion which gave rise to their culture.

A further conference, to explain Islam's approach to economic problems, was held in London in 1977, and was attended by finance ministers, governors of central banks, and senior officials from 27 Muslim countries and international organisations.

Last year's theme concerned the (nearly) 300 million Muslims who live as minorities all over the world from Japan to North America. A permanent body, the International Commission on Muslim Minorities, was set up to monitor and investigate reports of persecution of Muslim minorities.

The Islamic Institute of Defence Technology aims to assist the Muslim countries to develop their defence capabilities and technology. Its first international conference was held in London last February on Defence and the Muslim World, and delegates included Cabinet Ministers, chiefs of staff, ambassadors, and top decision and policy makers from 21 Muslim countries as well as observers from 15 non-Muslim countries.

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