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UNDERSTANDING INTER-BRASIAN CONFLICT

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Katy P. Sian

UNDERSTANDING INTER-BRASIAN CONFLICT
Sikhs and Muslims in the diaspora

The phenomenon of Sikh and Muslim conflict has been largely analysed in anthropological and sociological works in terms of a product of angry youth or ethnic hatred or religious passions. This paper explores the main ways in which the increasing tensions between Sikhs and Muslims have been articulated in the landscape of postcolonial Britain. It investigates the most prominent explanations provided both in academic and popular literature to understand the various causes seen to fuel this type of conflict, that is ethno-religious causes, multicultural issues and as the symptom of youth delinquency. The paper offers a critique of such accounts and moves towards an ontological understanding of conflict, that is, to elaborate the central role of conflict and its relationship to the political as the site for contestation between ‘friends and enemies’. This reading of Inter-BrAsian conflict enables us to open up a new space to re-evaluate the nature of Sikh and Muslim tensions within the diasporic context.

Introduction

A report conducted by Professor Gurharpal Singh (May 2010) entitled, ‘A perspective on Sikh-Muslim relations in the United Kingdom and causes of tensions and mistrust between the two communities’, sets out to explore Sikh-Muslim relations and investigates a series of acts of violence involving the two communities in a number of Britain’s major cities. These conflicts have now been ongoing for at least nine years. Sikh-Muslim conflict has become one of the major strands of Inter-BrAsian conflict. Back in 1996 Chetan Bhatt (1996, 245–51) in his book Liberation and Purity, commented upon increasing conflict within Britain’s South Asian communities, but he saw the main axis of this conflict arising from authoritarian religious social movements centred around, on the one hand, Hinduism, and, on the other hand, Islam.

In this account Bhatt focuses on the way in which some Hindu ultra nationalist groups have sought to reduce the genealogy of Sikhism as one of symbolizing war and opposition to Muslim authority, even though as Bhatt claims, some of the founders of Sikhism were Muslim (Bhatt 1996, 174). Bhatt’s discussion of communalism in Britain among BrAsians does not have much to say about Sikh activities in this area.
It is possible to see Bhatt’s neglect of Sikhs in three ways, first this is a consequence of Bhatt’s interest in generic notions of fundamentalism by which he can include Islamists and Hinduvata activists as belonging to the same category, thus the inclusion of the Sikhs as an independent collective would disrupt the symmetry of the Hindu-Muslim antagonism resulting in the common attempt to either slot Sikhs in as part of the Hindu camp, or to remove them completely from the analysis.

Secondly it is a product of the way in which Sikhs are a minority within a minority, that is among the dominant classification of ethnically marked populations there are groups which feel subsumed under this classification, for example, those described of Pakistani descent are in fact overwhelmingly Kashmiris. The phenomenon of minority within a minority then refers to the existence of emergent groups which are a minor presence within already existing ethnic minorities. In Bhatt’s account, the conflict between Muslims and Hindus is given much more prominence than the conflict between Sikhs and Muslims, as such this exemplifies the minority within a minority status of Sikhs vis-à-vis Hindus. Thirdly, it is a function of the way in which Inter-BrAsian differences are either erased or ethnographically described rather than seen as a working of political logics. Differences between various BrAsian constituent groups are seen as reflections of primordial, communal identities. The transformation of differences into antagonisms is not explained, rather it is naturally assumed.

With increased tensions between Sikh and Muslim communities we can isolate three main explanations that are frequently drawn upon to account for this conflict. It is important to note that these explanations are both ‘expert’, in other words the work of academics and analysts, as well as popular, that is perceptions of the causes of this conflict have been distilled into the general population of Sikhs through various cultural channels. In this paper we will focus primarily upon the ‘expert’ literature since it is through such research that the vocabulary for accounting for Sikh-Muslim conflict is fashioned. The conflict between Sikhs and Muslims then is typically assumed to be caused by ethno-religious grievances, issues of multiculturalism, or as a symptom of delinquent youth and ‘turf wars’, it is important to note that such causes often overlap, we are only separating them for analytical purposes, in most accounts these different causes are not necessarily exclusive of each other. As such we will examine these explanations before going on to investigating the nature of conflict itself.

The background which is seen to be hegemonic in the development of Sikh-Muslim antagonism is rooted within several key events: these include historical tensions pointing specifically towards the threat of Mughal ‘tyranny’ during the emergence of Sikhism combined with the partition of 1947. Secondly is the idea of ‘forced’ conversions in the British diaspora where it is widely circulated that ‘predatory’ Muslim males are attempting to ‘aggressively’ target and convert ‘vulnerable’ Sikh girls into Islam. Thirdly is mistaken identity in the wake of the war on terror, in which Sikhs have often been confused for being Muslim, this has contributed to igniting tensions in which Sikhs are unhappy about being mistaken for a ‘troublesome’ rather than a hard-working, upwardly mobile and assimilated community. Together these three elements have established the context for the emergence of an antagonistic discourse which remains dominant within the Sikh diaspora. This paper however is not concerned with the elaboration of these particular tropes, rather the focus is upon the way in which these tensions have been inflected through various registers of explanation to understand Inter-BrAsian conflict.
Ethno-religious causes

Ethno-religious causes are the most common explanations offered for understanding Sikh-Muslim conflict. This is partly due to the way in which because both Sikhs and Muslims are designated as ethnic minorities, it follows that conflict between them would be an ethnic one. However, the very notion of ethnic minority is not as straightforward as it seems, since ethnic minorities are inevitably contrasted with national majorities, and this division between the ethnically marked minority and the ethnically unmarked majority itself is inserted into the framework of the West and non-West (Sayyid and Hesse 2006). Thus the idea of ethnic conflict in the postcolonial context of Britain cannot be separated from the anthropological/colonial gaze with which BrAsians are commonly appropriated.

An ethnic conflict is broadly understood as one in which one or more ethnic or cultural groups clash, as Stefan Wolff (2006, 1) argues the term refers to:

A form of group conflict in which at least one of the parties involved interprets the conflict, its causes, and potential remedies, along an actually existing or perceived discriminating divide.

As such it marks a conflict that exists outside of the framework of conflict between nation-states. The recent upsurge in studies of ethno-religious conflict demonstrates the way in which analytical attention has begun to focus upon conflict in nation-states rather than between nation-states. Since the 1990s a remarkable 43 books have been published in English containing in the title the term ethnic conflict, compared to just 17 prior to that (Gilley 2004, 1155). According to Kaufman (2005, 179)

The study of ethnic conflict, as a distinct field, separate from the study of nationalism itself, is only about thirty years old and has gained wide attention mainly in the last ten. It has grown up primarily in response to the decline over the last half-century in the number of interstate wars and the simultaneous rise in the number of internal wars, especially ethnic and religious wars.

The term ethno-religious conflict describes conflicts which are organised not in terms of class or nation-state, rather it emerges as a residual category in which conflicts that are considered to be motivated by illegitimate causes are grouped. Thus it is the case that conflicts which are described as being ethno-religious are not transparent or neutral, for example the centuries old warfare between the English and the French is rarely (if ever) presented as an instance of an ethnic conflict. Thus there is a politics of which some conflicts are designated as ethnic and some which are not.

In his critique of the deployment of categories such as religion in identifying non-European subjects, Arvind-Pal Singh Mandair (2006) argues such signifiers recycle and instil the colonial relationship of West/non-West, Self and Other. BrAsians continue to be seen primarily in religious terms or as communities in which religion is central despite their migration and settlement in Britain, thus for example, the idea of the Sikhs as primarily a religious community, accessible via techniques of the anthropology of religion is one of the major ways in which Sikh identity is conceptualised.

The designation then of Sikh-Muslim conflict as ethno-religious precedes almost tautologically from the definition of Sikhs and Muslims as ethnic minorities, in other
words, when ethnically marked communities clash it is classed as an ethno-religious conflict. By describing the conflict as being ethno-religious any further analysis is foreclosed and all that can be done is to furnish more descriptions of the scale and frequency of the conflict and not inquire into its fundamental causes. In this way Sikh-Muslim conflict can be inserted into the genre of ethno-religious conflict studies. One of the interesting things about looking at the literature on ethno-religious conflict is how infrequent the attempts are to define the concept. It is simply assumed then that an ostensive definition of an ethno-religious conflict is more than adequate, thus we see presented in the discourse case-study after case-study being offered with the belief that continually expanding the list of ethnic conflicts makes it possible to understand what an ethnic conflict actually is.

Within the description of the Sikh-Muslim conflict as ethno-religious it is possible to tease out three main lines of causality which purport to account for its occurrence. First, it is implied that conflict arises for ‘natural’ reasons. In other words, ethnic conflicts do not have a rational basis, and thus they can only be explained as the working out of some innate primordial urges. Within this approach Sikhs and Muslims fight each other because such an antagonism is ‘hard-wired’ into their collective psyches. The assumption is rarely stated, but continually evoked. Thus, once an antagonism is determined to be an ethno-religious conflict there is no need for further elaboration since ethnicities by their very nature are prone to hostility against other ethnicities. Therefore no further explanation is necessary and the task of the analyst is simply to map out the conflict.

Secondly, it is possible to see in the idea of ethno-religious conflict the erasure of historical developments and transformations. To elaborate, because the conflict between Sikhs and Muslims is deemed to be ethnic it follows that its contemporary occurrence requires little examination. Ethnic conflicts are presented as being primordial, in other words beyond history. The question then as to why Sikhs and Muslims collide in postcolonial Britain is considered to be unnecessary since it is assumed that Muslims and Sikhs will fight whenever and wherever they are. Again the deterministic nature of this argument can be softened by suggesting that Sikhs and Muslims have a propensity for hostility that may only be operationalised in specific circumstances. This softening however does not alter the basic essentialist structure of this argument.

Thirdly, it is suggested that Sikh-Muslim ethno-religious conflict can be accounted for by the way in which notions of ethnic identification and religious affiliation make claims that they are exclusive and absolutist and can brook no difference or dissent. As such Sikhs and Muslims living in close proximity are bound to clash.

As it can be seen, such ethno-religious causal narratives do not actually explain Sikh-Muslim conflict, they simply describe it and allow our background understanding of what the designation ethnic/religious conveys to carry explanatory weight. Not only are these explanations essentialist they are also Orientalist in the sense that they assume that conflict between groups that have a non-Western heritage are a ‘people without history’ (see Wolf 1982) and as such their struggles are to be accounted for in terms of the working out of innate and cultural logics. Thus, cultural reductive explanations of Sikh-Muslim conflict prevent us from understanding not only the contemporary context of the conflict but also understanding why the nature of the conflict has changed over time. In other words, why has Sikh-Muslim conflict been episodic rather than constant? If the Sikh-Muslim conflict is instinctive, rather like a conflict between spiders and scorpions, then why is it that its occurrence is shaped by
environmental factors? The designation of Sikh-Muslim conflict as an ethnic/religious category can fulfil a descriptive function but the description is not adequate to provide a convincing explanation.

Multiculturalist causes

The next approach to explain this antagonism focuses upon the notion of institutional multiculturalism. That is, the policies of the British state which developed since the 1980s, initially by municipal governments in the major conurbations of Britain, particularly Ken Livingston’s Greater London Council (GLC) in London which shifted from policies of uncritical assimilation towards a relatively more accommodationist stance to Britain’s ethnicised minorities. Multiculturalism is an essentially contested concept, for Barnor Hesse (2000, 2) multiculturalism can be defined as:

...particular discourses or social forms which incorporate marked cultural differences and diverse ethnicities. In this ‘substantive’ sense, multiculturalism can be named, valued, celebrated and repudiated from many different political perspectives.

The term then refers to the recognition of plurality and diversity, and argues, as far as practically possible, that public policy should be attuned to legitimate needs and demands of its heterogeneous population, for example the provision of halal food. The meaning itself is hotly debated with many politicians, commentators and academics arguing that it is a divisive policy and produces retrograde results (Hesse 2000, 1). Generally the term multiculturalism refers to the recognition of multiple cultures or ways of life organised around particular forms of identity; multiculturalism also, especially in the eyes of its critics, implies a valorisation of non-Western cultures which is often presented as a translation into cultural relativism. Cultural relativism argues that all cultural practices are equivalent, thus the most repressive and abhorrent behaviour can thrive by being described as a cultural practice, and therefore, equivalent to any other cultural practice (Sayyid 2003, 139–40).

However, as Richard Rorty (1989) and others point out this view of cultural relativism is defective since there are no serious arguments which would suggest, for example, killing a baby girl or not killing a baby girl are equivalent acts despite their cultural claims, rather, what cultural relativists can argue for is that there is no god’s-eye view of human society and no super cultural platform by which we can judge one cultural practice against another (Sayyid 2003, 139–40).

The argument that Sikh-Muslim conflict is itself caused by multicultural policies of British governments is based upon two key premises, first, it is argued that the categorisation of ethnic minorities, as for example Sikhs and Muslims, is a response to the way in which multicultural policy reads ethnicised minorities, thus there is an underlying assumption that there is an alliance between ‘community elders’ and the political establishment which fragments ethnic minorities along religious and communal boundaries, therefore, this multicultural policy is often read as the successor to the British colonial policy of divide and rule. The emergence of public actors as Sikhs or Muslims is seen as a product not of an authentic desire among those communities, but rather, a complex play
of instrumental manoeuvrings between ethnic brokers and the mandarins of multiculturalism.

The second premise is that the multicultural terrain channelled any demand from ethnic minorities along culturalist lines, in other words, multiculturalist policy forces local communities to organise themselves among ethnic and religious lines eschewing other forms of solidarity. In this anti-multiculturalism interpretation, multiculturalism is seen not only as the site of contestation between both communities, but also, the principle cause for Sikh-Muslim conflict, in that once social agents are organised along ethno-religious lines then the competition for public funding recognition and other resources translates into a conflict between cultural groupings.

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In the case of Sikh-Muslim conflict there is a growing assumption that Muslims especially after 9/11 and 7/7 are the principle beneficiaries of public funding and are thus able to influence public policy in favour of their communal interests and at the expense of other communities including Sikhs. However, the idea that multiculturalism is a principle cause of Sikh-Muslim conflict is confronted by four major anomalies. First, it is not at all evident that British multicultural policy favours religious groupings over ethno-national formations, in other words it is easier to secure funding for a Pakistani or Bangladeshi community centre than a mosque. The so-called concessions that the British state have been forced to make have been the result of Muslim mobilisations rather than the policies of the political establishment. For example, Muslims gained the right to have Muslim grant-maintained schools (along the lines of Church of England, Catholic and Jewish grant-maintained schools) as a result of a long struggle.

Secondly, Sikh-Muslim conflict cannot be accounted for by multiculturalism policies since these policies view Sikhs and Muslims in very different terms, to elaborate, Sikhs are considered to be a legal racial minority, and as such enjoy legal protection from discrimination, a right which is not accorded to Muslims as Muslims, therefore, multiculturalism impacts upon Sikhs and Muslims differently. Thirdly, the competition between public resources and recognition does not explain Sikh-Muslim conflict since it already takes for granted the construction of Sikh-Muslim collective identities. Multiculturalism does not produce Sikhs or Muslims and therefore, in itself does not produce Sikh-Muslim conflict.

Fourthly, the idea that Sikh-Muslim conflict is simply manipulations and conspiracies by community elders falls into the logic of puppet-masters and does not explain why the Sikh antipathy towards Muslims enjoys such a high degree of resonance amongst all sections of the community. This becomes more inexplicable in relation to the fact that many other interventions and injunctions by Sikh community elders do not enjoy the same degree of support, for example greater attendance at the Gurdwara. Therefore, even if one was to concede that community elders are responsible for generating the Sikh-Muslim conflict we would still have to explore how and why they are able to do this and at the same time unable to modify behaviour in other circumstances.

Youth delinquency as a cause

The last approach we will examine to explain the Sikh-Muslim conflict points to the idea of youth delinquency and ‘turf wars’ which evokes the notion of gangs or more specifically the ‘Asian’ gang in which such conflict is often seen as a symptom of the
misconduct of young BrAsian groups. For Claire Alexander (2000) the ‘Asian’ gang construct has a particular cultural element in which tropes such as ‘...culture conflict, religious antipathy, of alienness and unknowability, of introspective, intra-ethnic society’ (Alexander 2000, xiii) have come to signify the very idea of the gang. Such tropes are embedded within popular literatures examining BrAsian youth, whereby rebellious activity generic of all groups is translated within a cultural paradigm which pathologises the very category of BrAsian youth, that is, such behaviour is seen as being particularly ‘Asian’. The idea of the ‘culture clash’ is a prominent trope which continues to narrate BrAsian youth whereby it is suggested that there is a continuing struggle for such groups to negotiate both their ‘Anglo’ British and Asian identity.

This idea of cultural schizophrenia has been attributed to BrAsian youth from the earliest days of mass settlement (for example Anwar’s (1998) Between Cultures summed up this view of an innate ‘tension’ between young Asians wanting to enjoy the Westernised lifestyle, while being restricted by family and communal authority from doing so). Cultural schizophrenia or the ‘culture clash’ thus becomes one of the causes of the identity crisis that is assumed to afflict BrAsian populations especially its youthful cohort. What is interesting is that this youthful element remains constant even though we are now describing a multigenerational population, moreover, ideas of youthful rebellion, struggles for autonomy and so on, are, it could be argued, a life-cycle phenomenon of the contemporary world and not just specific to South Asians. What is problematic about this view is precisely the way it translates a general phenomenon into a marker of cultural specificity.

Placing the Sikh-Muslim conflict within this framework has become all too easy for many commentators in which we see rehashed the very ideas of the ‘culture clash’, religious hatred, alienation and so on. These easy theorisations have been widely adopted in attempts to explain this phenomenon which locate such an antagonism as a product of BrAsian youth misdemeanour played out between gangs and their area codes. This can be seen in an account by Rifat Malik (1997) who talks about a ‘spiral of gang violence’ between Sikh and Muslim youths leaving the community of Slough frightened and intimidated. He goes on to describe a ‘volatile’ situation in which tempers between both sides of youths have flared and points to a range of explanations for such unrest.

Malik argues that the antagonism has sparked as the result of rival gangs, the Sikh Shere Punjabs (Lions of the Punjab) and the Muslim Chalvey boys, the reasons for such violent clashes are seen to be the result of an ‘identity crisis’, as mentioned previously, religious hatred and territory. The idea of territory is seen as significant where it is argued that each side is protecting ‘their’ space from the ‘other’ who deliberately invades the area to make trouble. The idea of sexual rivalry is also seen as an integral element in heightening this youth violence where notions of ‘forced’ conversions feature prominently in which the Sikhs argue that Muslims treat Sikh girls as ‘slags’. Malik goes on to finish the article by labelling this generation of BrAsian youth as a ‘confused underclass’ (Malik 1997). We see here quite clearly the internalisation of the hegemonic construct of troubled BrAsian youth.

Missing from Malik’s account is the involvement of gangs in criminal activity and questions of masculinity, such tropes widely circulate in the constructs of the ‘Asian’ gang which appear almost always to make an inherent link between young men, racialisation and criminal behaviour. Since Stuart Hall et al.’s pioneering Policing the Crisis (1978) there has been recognition in some quarters that racism, policing and sensational
media coverage help to produce an association between ethnically marked minority youth and specific forms of criminal behaviour.

Following the 1970s one can see that this pattern of engaging with the relationship between ethnic minority youth and crime has been modified to the extent in which increasingly the emphasis has moved from the black ‘mugger’ to the BrAsian ‘troublemaker’. This troublemaker is typically almost exclusively a young BrAsian man who has abandoned his parents’ law-abiding values and is involved in drug dealing and ‘grooming’. This figure is prone to violence which expresses a hypermasculinity arising from BrAsian culture, the effect of this is to transform generic petty antisocial behaviour of young men into a more specific failure of BrAsian youth to adapt to wider society (Kalra 2006, 241–3).

Young BrAsian men then are largely seen as the dominant figure acting as defenders of communities from racism from outsiders. The ‘Asian’ gang is often seen as an extended solidarity network for disenfranchised youth and here it is crucial that the capacity of Asians to organise in large numbers is seen as a feature of the gang, arising from the way in which such networks operate within BrAsian culture, thus family and braderie (brotherhood) ties are seen as significant in mobilising BrAsian young men for the purpose of the gang. The masculine nature of BrAsian communities is complicated since it has been pointed out that most often BrAsian men through Indological/Orientalist discourse have been described as effeminate, furthermore, there has been an emphasis on women in BrAsian communities which has helped to marginalise masculinity, as Alexander (2000) argues BrAsian masculinity has been made invisible.

There is at the same time a growing trend in which BrAsian masculinity is seen in a hypermasculine form, in other words BrAsian men are seen as oppressors of women and practitioners of ultra patriarchal cultural practices which subordinate and exclude women (Alexander 2000, 236). This is most clearly demonstrated in the representation of BrAsian youth as male, the clash of masculinities then becomes another causal factor which purports to account for Sikh-Muslim conflict.

These final points complete the main body of how BrAsian youth violence is understood. These reasons need to be further critiqued since they remain locked into assumptions replete with elements from the immigrant imaginary. A comparison between youth gang violence based upon the case of the Mods and the Rockers on Brighton Beach and the Shere Punjabs and the Chalvey Boys in Slough would not necessarily yield very distinct results. What is remarkable is the way in which youth gang violence in Slough is ethnically marked and as such is open to the anthropological gaze by which ethnically marked minorities, especially those from South Asian heritages, are most often appropriated. Thus explanatory devices which may account for non-ethnically marked gang warfare such as the Mods and Rockers are deemed to have very little purchase in explaining youth violence between the Shere Punjabs and the Chalvey Boys since it is assumed that their cultural/ethnic belonging would trump any more general sociological explanations. To elaborate, in the case of the Mods and Rockers by Stan Cohen (1973) ethnicity, i.e. ‘whiteness’, was not seen to have much explanatory force, in contrast ethnicity is seen as decisive in explaining why young Sikh and Muslim men form into gangs and fight each other. This insistence upon the racialisation of the Asian gang obscures a more nuanced and critical understanding of what may lie behind these bursts of violence.

The underlying assumption that differences in religion/culture are sufficient to produce hostility is rarely questioned. As a result Sikh and Muslim youth fighting can
almost be explained by exclusively referring to their characterisation of Sikh and Muslim in the first place, as a consequence such conflict has a tautological structure since it is both seen as a manifestation of Sikh-Muslim hostility and its cause, thus this account offers us no insight as to what may be the cause of such antagonism in postcolonial Britain. More importantly nor can it be argued that Sikh-Muslim conflict is simply exhausted by youth gang warfare, as the construction of the hegemonic antagonism between Sikhs and Muslims in the UK includes large sections of the Sikh community and is not exclusive to just members of Sikh gangs and Sikh youth in general. Perhaps it makes more sense to see the Sikh gangs and their antipathy to Muslims as a symptom of a larger Sikh-Muslim conflict rather than as its principle cause.

Deconstructing Sikh-Muslim relations

Professor Gurharpal Singh’s report (May 2010) explores the increasing tensions between Sikh and Muslim communities in Britain and attempts to unpack the causes of this antagonism by providing a descriptive and in-depth enunciation of the historical and contemporary explanations seen to be fuelling this conflict. The report explores the causes and tensions of mistrust between Sikh and Muslim communities in the UK. As such it is committed to finding ways to tackle such issues and offers several recommendations for future ways to approach and deal with the tension between both groups.

The report offers rich empirical findings and attempts to critique various stereotypes which continue to haunt BrAsians, it states that rather than the conflict being read as a manageable difficulty it becomes instead translated as a communal conflict (Singh 2010, 35). The report encourages inter-faith dialogue, the re-discovery of a common heritage, and de-essentialising communal visions of religion (ibid., 42). It goes on to suggest that ‘funding by statutory and voluntary organisations for Muslim and Sikh community projects should be made conditional on providing conclusive evidence of cross-cultural outcomes’. It suggests that the media, particularly those literatures that may incite hatred, must be monitored, furthermore both communities should come together to condemn religious violence against other religious minorities (ibid.). Additionally the report urges that both communities should aim to work in mainstream political parties, trade unions, the voluntary sector and business associations to address common interests and concerns, and finally the report recommends that the leaders from both communities should be open to learn from good practice, whether from Britain or overseas (ibid., 43). The report promotes further research and training in this area such as positive documentation representing cultural and religious commonalities, a tool-kit dedicated to Sikh-Muslim relations and support for projects in the area (ibid., 44).

In light of all this, the argument in what follows throughout this paper is not to dismiss the richness and insight offered by the report, however, our aim is to understand conflict and what we mean when we talk about Sikh and Muslim conflict, that is, we want to interrogate the very notion of conflict by adopting a conceptual vocabulary which will enable us to understand how this antagonism constructs and forges identities departing from conventional primordial accounts which tend to take for granted conflict between ethnically marked communities.

It is important to recognise that conflict is not external to identity formation, if we are serious about resolving conflict between Sikhs and Muslims, first and foremost we
must understand how this conflict is intrinsic to ways of being Sikh and Muslim. Thus ending the conflict between both communities requires us to rethink and remake what it means to be Sikh and Muslim in Britain. The various measures suggested by the report are not necessarily bad in themselves but are akin to using a band-aid when major surgery is required.

This becomes clearer when we examine in detail the seven causes that the report lists as being behind Sikh-Muslim conflict. These include:

1. Sikh narratives of settlement in Britain increasingly speak of being the ‘favoured sons of the empire’. This, it is said, is reflected in Sikhs’ ability to work the British state so that key interests of the community are always protected.
2. The demography of the traditional areas of Sikh settlement is changing as a result of new immigration from Europe, South Asia, Middle East and Europe. The ‘Little Punjabs’ identified are now being exposed to ‘super-diversity’, and in particular, an increase in the size and settlement of Muslim communities which, according to the latest Labour Force Survey, are almost seven times more numerous than Sikh communities. This rapid demographic change, especially since 2001, is likely to lead to intense competition over resources such as housing, education, social services and social security.
3. Third, the profile of both Muslim and Sikh communities in the UK is very young.
4. One of the constant refrains present in contemporary Muslim-Sikh tensions is the theme of ‘forced conversions’ of Sikh girls.
5. Following 9/11 and 7/7 many turban-wearing Sikhs became victims of hate crime as they were targeted by racists who made no distinction between Sikhs and Muslims.
6. An extreme form of differentiation among British Sikhs has led a few Sikhs to support the British National Party (BNP).
7. Seventh, in internet discussions young Sikhs like to draw a sharp contrast between Sikhism’s view of women’s rights and those under Islam, often in derogatory communal caricatures. (Singh 2010, 34–8)

These causes are further furnished by interrogating the explanations surrounding youth, multiculturalism and religion/ethnicity to account for Sikh and Muslim conflict. Without repeating the shortcomings of this approach it is important to further critique the report to understand why it is not necessarily useful or effective in our understandings of Sikh-Muslim conflict.

First and fundamentally as this paper will go on to explore, is the absence of what actually constitutes conflict itself, without this rudimentary conceptualisation which is significant for understanding any conflict, we take for granted the subjects and the nature of conflict and thus jump into the causes providing description after description to understand why the conflict may be occurring without understanding what conflict actually means. Secondly, the report provides detailed analyses of Sikh and Muslim communities from their economic status to their demographic settlement or religious traditions and although this is descriptively rich it is where the account stops, it provides description after description comparing and drawing out the homologies and differences of the communities and not much more, thus we are stuck with a plethora of explanations about the communities first and foremost and not the nature of the conflict per se.

Thirdly, the report uses approaches typically adopted and mediated through a range of sites from academic to journalistic, which fail to escape the anthropological gaze, that
is the conflict between two ethnically marked communities is almost always assumed to be rooted in religion, ethnic, youth delinquency and so on. Although we are provided with rich descriptions of the causes of conflict, they remain limited for a number of reasons. Such accounts legitimise and reinforce the hegemonic racialised discourse, that is, through the rehashing of old tropes surrounding culture clashes and oppressive patriarchy the subjects are reduced and understood only in the context of essentialist readings, therefore their very being can only be understood through these frameworks which dictate how and why such subjects act the way they act. Let us take the example further of culture clashes, the report states the following as one of the explanations of Sikh-Muslim tension:

As minority religious and ethnic communities have become more firmly established, some of them now comprising fourth and fifth generation community members, most of whom are born in Britain, new types of tensions are emerging between minority religious and ethnic communities. These tensions can arise from differences ‘imported’ from the homeland; they can also emerge from the construction of new ‘communal’ identities in opposition to other communities. (Singh 2010, 5)

Such an understanding feeds into the idea of cultural schizophrenia as previously mentioned and is no more (or less) profound than the earlier anthropological discourses of the 1950s in understanding the ‘peculiarities’ of the experiences of ethnically-marked communities and their negotiations or tug of war in the struggle between ‘traditional’ values versus ‘modern’ values. These readings remain unhelpful because they play out and strengthen hierarchical relations through the marking out of ‘primitive/backwardness’ ‘oppressed/liberated’ and so on.

This contrasts greatly to accounts of conflict occurring between white groups, in which notions around tensions concerning whiteness are invisible and rarely if ever remarked upon (if so it is usually in the context of class in the case of football hooliganism for example). What is remarkable is that in such accounts only ethnically-marked communities experience these ‘culturally rooted’ negotiations, which seems to suggest that questions of identity, which affect all social beings, are appropriated and marked out as being specifically different through this ‘cultural’ register.

The report stresses ideas of this conflict as largely concerning the youth, we have already discussed at some length the shortcomings of approaches emphasising BrAsian delinquent youth, what remains peculiar however is that the report also focuses the concern of Sikh involvement in the BNP, for example:

At the same time as this tension is increasing, the BNP is seeking to fish in troubled waters by making overtures to sections of British Sikhs (and Hindus) to form tactical and strategic alliances against British Muslims for the promotion of its virulent Islamophobia. While the number of Sikhs who have responded to the BNP’s calls is no more than a handful, the broader resentment among British Sikhs against Muslims has the potential to grow beyond its current narrow local confines by drawing on events in South Asia, the historic narratives of the two communities’ shared and antagonistic paths, and the opportunistic policies of British political parties which promote racism from below by a new policy of ‘divide and rule’.

(Singh 2010, 5)
The rise of Sikh involvement in the BNP even if only a ‘handful’ is important as it clearly encourages a violent Islamophobia, but more importantly for our understanding one must note that the Sikh member of the BNP, Mr Singh, aged 78, can hardly be classed as young. This is significant because it actually presents the contrary to what this report is stating, that is, this conflict cannot just simply be understood categorically as a tension largely between youth, it is a conflict which clearly circulates throughout the Sikh community of all ages and is not a new phenomena. Perhaps it is more intense against the backdrop of the current climate, however it is certainly not a conflict concerning the new generation of BrAsian youth. To elaborate, similar tensions as previously mentioned between Sikhs and Muslims existed in the 1980s in the UK, with incidents between the Shere Punjabs and the Muslim Chalvey boys, or even before that the predominantly Sikh and Muslim gangs of the 1970s named the Holy Smokes and the Billy Boys predate the conflicts in Slough.¹⁷

As such, Sikh and Muslim conflict cannot be so easily understood in terms of angry brown youth which is evidently the temptation here. By emphasising religious reasons, youth delinquency and multiculturalist explanations, these subjects can only be read through certain registers without going beyond that, this is important because it is precisely the ‘going beyond’ that opens up the space for these actors to gain autonomy, however it is these spaces which remain closed through such essentialist approaches.

Finally the report seems to maintain that this conflict has the same resonance for both Sikhs and Muslims, that is, the hostility or tension is something which corresponds or is mirrored equally among both communities. However, this is actually not the case, as whilst the antagonism is prominent within the Sikh community, it in fact appears not to be mirrored within the Muslim imagination nearly to the same extent, this presents a curious situation in which we have a one-sided conflict (Sian 2010). Let us explore this further, the report seems to suggest the tensions between Sikhs and Muslims is equivalent on both sides, for example it draws upon Pakistani historical narratives during partition which stress that:

The Sikhs were clearing East Punjab of Muslims, butchering hundreds daily, forcing thousands to flee and burning Muslim villages. The Sikhs jathas always attacked Muslim migrants on their way to Pakistan...The Sikhs slaughtered the poor men, women, young and old in cold blood. The minor children were killed in a ruthless manner in the presence of their helpless parents. Women were raped and young girls were abducted.

(Rabbani and Sayyid, 1990, 107, in Singh 2010, 31)

While not to deny these anti-Sikh historical narratives which were not unique with the aftermath of partition as there were anti-Muslim and anti-Hindu narratives of the same kind which the report also concedes, however it is important to understand how these narratives have been used and domesticated in the context of contemporary Britain, that is, whilst both communities have experienced a somewhat antagonistic history, in the case of the Sikhs these narratives are still appropriated in the current climate and have a much greater resonance than they do within Muslim circles.

This can be seen with the ‘forced’ conversions narrative circulating largely within Sikh communities which is interestingly not subscribed to by the Muslim community, that is there is not a Sikh ‘threat’ for the Muslim community concerning Sikh men.
converting Muslim girls, nor is there the hegemonic narrative of ‘forced’ conversions of Sikhs to Islam circulating within the Muslim community. The available language of the historical tensions between Sikhs and Muslims has thus not been used in the same way, for Sikhs the history remains hegemonic in the formation of the Muslim enemy (Sian 2011), for Muslims however these narratives are rarely commented upon, moreover, Muslims are a global diaspora, thus historical narratives located in South Asia are one of many and are not more important than others, however for Sikhs the heart of their community lies within the Punjab, thus these narratives inevitably have more significance.

In addition to this if we explore the contemporary climate Muslims around the world have greater battles to fight concerning the ‘War on Terror’, Islamophobia, the Middle East, Kashmir, Chechnya and so on, thus in the greater scale of issues the threat of Sikhs does not seem to match the threat of Muslims to Sikhs. The conflict between Sikhs and Muslims then remains a highly one-sided conflict in which Sikhs see Muslims specifically as a threat, no other ethnic or religious community appears to ‘attack’ Sikhs the way Muslims do, that is there are no fears about Sikh conversions to Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and so on.

The question then that needs to be answered is under what circumstances is this language drawn upon and in what circumstances by drawing upon this language do Sikhs respond to it? One of the conditions which would enhance the capacity of the historical tropes to circulate more prominently for Sikhs than Muslims is provided by the uprooting of the Sikhs and the formation of a diaspora within Britain (Sian 2011). This is the key which the report fails to explore, it does not take into account the significant effect of migratory displacements upon the Sikh community to understand the conflict, rather old conflicts are imported unproblematically to the UK.

These displacements are in fact vital as Sikhs are required to both restitch and reimagine the Sikh community once again. As such, the fantasy of ‘Sikhness’ and what it represents has made ‘reality’ coherent by relocating these historical antagonisms within the UK and the Muslim enemy is again the figure that prevents the Sikh identity from fully constituting itself (Sian 2010). Through this figure of the Muslim antagonist these fantasies are resparked as the battle of good triumphing over evil continues to be waged against the backdrop of Britain’s postcolonial ethnoscapes through narratives of ‘forced’ conversions to Islam (Sian 2011).

Therefore the very specific Sikh stories of ‘vulnerable’ Sikh girls and ‘predatory’ Muslim males, helps to account for the homogeneity of the Sikh community which it lacks due to migratory displacements. This antagonistic discourse subscribed to by the Sikh diaspora represents or purports to explain a potential loss and by using the available historical discourses they can continue to re-describe their situation to identify themselves as Sikhs in Britain (Sian 2011). In other words, these Sikh narratives represent both the possibility of a Sikh identity in diasporic conditions and the failure of that possibility to by fully realised. The failure of Sikhism to fully constitute Sikh subjects in the conditions of the diaspora is represented through the presence of the Muslim enemy (Sian 2010).

It is important then to dismiss the idea that Sikh antagonism towards Muslims is a reflection of some kind of malign manipulation in which some kind of Illuminati provoke and prod innocent Muslims and Sikhs into an unnecessary conflict as a means of distancing them from their authentic common interests. Such a view of social transformations naturalises essentialist explanations through its dismissal and failure to identify the contingent and political nature of the process.
The ontology of conflict

Tradition takes what has come down to us and delivers it over to self-evidence; it blocks our access to those primordial ‘sources’ from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand. (Heidegger 1962, 43)

The report clearly exemplifies the conventional accounts of Inter-BrAsian tension, in which we have seen attempts to understand the Sikh-Muslim conflict without seriously attempting to understand what exactly conflict is. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) are concerned with examining the nature of conflict and offer an anti-foundationalist conceptualisation by dismissing the foundationalist ways in which conflict is read. As they point out accounts of conflict largely explain the various conditions, settings and environment which have enabled conflict to occur rather than explaining conflict itself (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 124). It becomes necessary then to reject the range of accounts on conflict which represent it typically and often uncritically as a clash between social agents with fully constituted identities, rather it is perhaps more useful instead to understand social antagonisms as emerging as a result of the failure of subjects to fully complete their identity (Zac and Sayyid 1998, 275).

This shift from ontic to ontological understandings of conflict rests upon Laclau and Mouffe’s theorisation of antagonism, for them conflict is primarily defined as an antagonistic relationship, an antagonistic relationship is not akin to a relationship between two objects colliding, e.g. two trains crashing, or as in essentialist accounts, two groups such as Sikhs and Muslims colliding. It is not the collision per se but rather the subsequent transformation, in this sense a conflict or antagonism necessitates a change in the subjectivity of the two opposing groupings as a result of the conflict itself. Therefore, it cannot be an objective relationship between entities whose interaction with one another is completely based upon exteriority — that is subjectivities do not transform in the process.

The relevance of this conceptualisation for understanding Sikh-Muslim conflict should be immediately clear. Sikhs and Muslims do not collide, do not clash and do not contradict but rather they have an antagonistic relationship. What is meant by an antagonism is:

[When]...the presence of the ‘Other’ prevents me from being totally myself. The relation arises not from full totalities, but from the impossibility of their constitution. The presence of the Other is not a logical impossibility: it exists; so it is not a contradiction. But neither is it subsumable as a positive differential moment in a causal chain, for in that case the relation would be given by what each force is and there would be no negation of this being.

(Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 124)

In other words, antagonism must not be read as an ‘objective relation’ rather it is a relation in which the limits of every subjectivity is revealed, such a notion of an antagonism implies a theory of subjectivity which places the construction of political agents or collectives at its heart. It is for this reason that an understanding of Sikh and Muslim
conflict cannot proceed without an understanding of Sikh identity. In such an ontological reading then, the heart of antagonism can be seen to lie within a perceived threat to identity. This threat to identity has a paradoxical nature, for on the one hand the threat to identity is a representation of negativity, that is a representation of all that is likely to subvert an identity, on the other hand, identity is only possible by the exclusion of the other. Thus the existence of an ‘other’ points to the limits of identity and constitutes its very possibility. In this theoretical elaboration we have seen the extension of the Saussurian insight (all identity is relational and contrastive) from the field of linguistics to the field of society (Saussure 1974).

Sikhs, it follows then, articulate the Muslim as a threat to constitute Sikhness, but in doing so make Muslims the constitutive outsiders by which their own identity can be defined. It should be clear that the import of this insight is that the Sikh-Muslim conflict is more about the construction of Sikh identity rather than the actual conflict with Muslims itself, something that most other accounts of Inter-BrAsian conflict fail to recognise. The antagonism between Sikhs and Muslims is not secondary but intrinsic since antagonism is implicit in the failure of identity to be fully formed, to further elucidate this point we need to focus on an anti-foundationalist theorisation on the formation of social agents.

Social agents are not formed or are not given by the economy, biology, culture or God, an anti-foundationalist conception of social agents rejects the idea that such subjectivities can be founded upon any essence. Laclau and Mouffe proceed to articulate a theory of social agents by developing a post-structuralist interpretation of Marxism. This suggests that the subject appears as a product of a structure but the structure itself is never complete and its lack of completion means that the subject appears as a way of covering the gap within the structure, thus identities are not formed by structures but rather this reading refers to the way in which structures produce incomplete identities. In other words the incompleteness of structures leads to the incompleteness of identities and it is in this incompleteness that we find what is represented by the articulation of antagonism. That is, all identity cannot be completed since structures cannot be closed, this insight radicalises the Saussurian dictum of identity as being relational and negative. To be a Sikh then can only be done so in relation to instances of non-Sikhness and the absence of positivity has to be represented by an antagonistic relationship which explains the subversion of all efforts to fully constitute the Sikh subject.

The hegemonic discourse of Sikhs in the UK is based upon representing the Muslim as the antagonistic ‘other’, which accounts for the failure of a fully constituted Sikh. Thus the conflict between Sikhs and Muslims occurs not ontically but ontologically, that is ontic instances of the conflict are merely means by which the ontological can be disclosed. The Sikh-Muslim conflict may be over-determined by rivalries based around territory, resources, religion, culture, etc., but ultimately the conflict arises from the articulation of a hegemonic discourse through which the presence of negativity (i.e. the failure of a fully constituted identity) is increasingly represented not through the existence of racism, social deprivation or citizenship, but rather through the figure of the ‘predatory’ Muslim.

As well as revealing a ‘negativity’ or ‘lack’ in social relations by demonstrating the impossibility of agents fulfilling their identity, antagonisms are also decisive of social action itself, thus, social formations are constituted through both the formation of antagonistic relations as well as the establishment of political boundaries between subjects.
Conflict then shows the limits of a particular social formation, that is, identity is no longer secured in a differential system, rather it is challenged by forces which are external or lie beyond that order, in other words, the threat to identity by an outsider is fundamental to an antagonistic relation. The figure of the Muslim is the figure around which hegemonic narratives of Sikhness are articulated, that is the Muslim within such a construction exhibits an inversion of the qualities that are supposedly characteristic of an ideal Sikh, for example, equality versus gender inequality, economic prosperity versus economic stagnation, and backward practices versus assimilation and modernity... The Muslim then is seen to threaten the Sikh community and Sikhness can thus only become itself by being able to defeat this Muslim ‘threat’.

By understanding Sikh and Muslim conflict in this way we are able to investigate the means by which social relations between both communities in the context of the diaspora have been established and maintained. The Sikh and Muslim conflict is the limit which makes possible Sikh identity. It is this condition of possibility that is central, thus it should be clear that throughout this paper has deliberately departed from offering a detailed enumeration of instances and specifics of where groups of Sikhs may have come to blows with groups of Muslims, rather what is important is how such instances of the antagonism have both constructed and sustained a particular hegemonic Sikh identity, in other words, in the current context of the postcolonial the dominant version of Sikhness is only possible through its conflict with the Muslim antagonist. This has important implications for projects which aim to ameliorate Sikh-Muslim tensions.

**Conclusion**

The real friend-enemy grouping is existentially so strong and decisive that the non-political antithesis, at precisely the moment at which it becomes political, pushes aside and subordinates its hitherto purely religious, purely economic, purely cultural criteria and motivates to the conditions and conclusions of the political situation at hand.

(Schmitt 1996, 38)

The report highlighted incidents of Inter-BrAsian conflict between Sikhs and Muslims. Such conflict in the form of youth gang violence and ‘forced’ conversions has enjoyed a great deal of media attention as well as being a source of great anxiety and concern, principally among the Sikh community. The report, however, deployed a framework which sees conflict between non-Western peoples through an anthropological gaze, as a consequence it fails to take into account historical transformations and political mobilisations which shape the contours and construct the very form of any social antagonism.

In this paper it has been argued that what is necessary is not an ontic but rather an ontological understanding of conflict, including conflict between Sikhs and Muslims in the BrAsian diaspora. Such an approach allows us to understand the roles of antagonisms in the construction of distinct collective identities, rather than simply the outcome of pre-existing ethnic differences. At the heart of the conflict between Sikhs and Muslims is a hegemonic account of what it means to be a Sikh in contemporary Britain, that is, what really animates this conflict is not just a struggle for resources or influence, but rather a struggle for what it is to be a Sikh.
By rejecting conventional accounts of ethnic conflict we are able to move our understandings towards a reading which instead emphasises the centrality of the political and thus escapes the entrapment of an essentialist analysis when exploring hostilities between ethnically marked groups. The possibility of the political then is inherent in all social relations and by arguing for the political nature of the Sikh and Muslim conflict we are also arguing for it to be constitutive of Sikh identity itself. This paper has thus stressed the significance of the conditions by which the articulations of an antagonism forge a particular way of being, which is perhaps a more useful route to take when examining conflicts between ethnically marked groups.

Notes

1 BrAsian is a term used to ‘designate members of settler communities which articulates a significant part of their identity in terms of South Asian heritage’ (Sayyid 2006, 5). See Ali, Kalra, and Sayyid (2006).

2 The claim that some of the founders of Sikhism including Guru Nanak were actually Muslims flies in the face of Sikh assertions that these founding figures were neither Muslim nor Hindu. Attempts to recover an authentic Muslim or an authentic Hindu identity of the founders of Sikhism is to fall into the trap of essentialism which reduces Sikhism in ‘essence’ to being nothing more than a variant of either Hinduism or Islam or a melange of the two.

3 Bhatt understands conflict between Muslims and Hindus as communalism which minimises the political aspects of these conflicts by translating them into effects of primordial identities. See Paul Brass’ (2003) work for the deliberate and political nature of the so-called ‘communal’ conflicts that plague contemporary India.

4 For further elaboration see Ali (2002).

5 For elaboration, see one of the few academic studies that focuses directly on the Sikh-Muslim conflict: Moliner (2007).

6 It is not entirely surprising with the ending of the Cold War that there has been increased scholarly scrutiny of the phenomenon of ethnic conflict since it can be argued that the end of the Cold War and the impact of globalisation have led to the erosion of the Westphalian order which led to the emergence of ‘sub-national’ groupings. Since the end of the Cold War, conflict within states has become a far more common occurrence rather than conflict between states, as Saxton (2005, 88) articulates, ‘the post-Cold War period has seen both an explosion of ethnic and nationalist conflict behavior and the sophistication of explanations of that behavior’. Data collected by the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo and the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University show that between 1946 and 2001, there were approximately 50 ethnic conflicts with more than 25 people killed per year (Wolff 2006, 10). Michael Mann lists that from 2003, 36 ethnic and religious conflicts were taking place, ranging from Rwanda to Cyprus, furthermore, in over half of these cases substantial killing was involved (Mann 2006, 2). See Sayyid (2000) for details on globalisation and the undermining of the Westphalian state.

7 Such literature includes Horowitz (1985); Esman (1977); and Schneckener and Wolff (2004).

8 See Mandair (2006) for further elaboration.
Such case studies include Palestinians and Israelis, Bosnians and Serbs and Turks and Kurds, to name but a few. See Horowitz (1985) and Esman (1977) for elaboration.

See for example Anthias (1998) for such argumentation.

For example newspaper reports following the Bradford riots (2001) and various television documentaries following the 7/7 bombings in London including Channel 4’s *Dispatches*, ‘Young, Angry and Muslim’ (October 2005).

See Ahmad (2006) for a critique of this pathologisation. This can clearly be seen as being beholden to the ‘Immigrant Imaginary’ that is a series of discursive representations based around the ontological and temporal distinction between host and immigrant. See Sayyid (2004) and Sayyid and Hesse (2006).

For example various mainstream media accounts following the riots of 2001 targeted Muslim youth (males) as the ‘folk devil’ in which such activity was seen as a cultural or ethnic trope.

The ‘immigrant imaginary’ is an analytical device and is beholden to Orientalist and Indological ways of thinking about non-Western social phenomena. It continually attempts to replace political motivations and agency with cultural, biological and other mechanistic accounts, thus the immigrant imaginary fixes in the colonial gaze the experiences of ex-colonial subjects relocated in the metropole. See Sayyid and Hesse (2006).

This anthropological gaze is both academic, for example the work of Werbner 1990 and Ballard 1994, and also popular, as seen in portrayals of young BrAsians on television, in newspapers and on film which continue to reproduce this gaze, for example representations of BrAsian families in soaps such as *Eastenders* and Channel 4’s first series of *Skins*, and docudramas such as *Yasmin*, also broadcast on Channel 4. In addition ministerial interventions and public debate are often exclusively conducted in such a way that social problems are anthropologised; such topics often include the rise of religious fundamentalism and women’s oppression.

See Cohen (1973) for elaboration of the Mods and Rockers case study, in which no reference to ‘whiteness’ was used to explain the so-called violence, rather reasons pointed instead to bored youth.

It has to be pointed out that Islam is a proselytising faith, thus conversion is not just specific to Sikhs, but rather open-ended to include other groups as well.

Of course objects by definition lack subjectivity therefore a collision or a crash cannot transform their identity, see Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 30–40).

As our interest is in Sikh representations of the Sikh-Muslim conflict the primary constructions of identity that we are concerned with are those articulated only by Sikhs. These constructions are based on the elaboration of an ‘Us and Them’, therefore our concerns are about the Sikh constructions of Sikhness and the Sikh constructions of Muslimness. There is no attempt to locate an authentic Muslim subjectivity in this discourse, nor is it necessary for our purposes.

References


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