DEAF MUSLIMS SEARCHING FOR ISLAM

An insight into the complex barriers faced by the UK's Deaf Muslim Community

Tariq Mahmood

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1. Introduction

In 2000 I graduated from Wolverhampton University with a British Sign Language/English Interpreting degree. I have since qualified as a Registered Sign Language Interpreter (RSLI) and worked in a variety of settings within the mainstream Deaf community. However, in addition to this I have the unique position of being the only British Asian, Muslim-born, male RSLI in the UK to date. This is extremely rare but has enabled me to become more involved with the Deaf Muslim community as a British Sign Language (BSL) Interpreter with additional language and cultural skills. These unique skills allow me to simultaneously interpret between Arabic and Urdu in addition to BSL and English.

It has also pushed me to develop and provide a service for the provision of the Umrah,the Holy pilgrimage to Mecca, in Saudi Arabia. This is a unique and highly specialised, bespoke service aimed at Deaf Muslims who are then given total inclusion and complete access, throughout, via BSL, the Deaf individuals first language.

However, a complete lack of this specialised communication provision is one of the biggest obstacles faced by Deaf Muslims, in the UK today, to accessing any Islamic education. Having an interpreter with the appropriate language skills, religious and cultural knowledge would enable the service-user to access their religion and thus begin to form an Islamic identity also.

This work aims to provide an insight into these complexities experienced by the UK's Deaf Muslim community in 2014. It will raise points of concern, interest and overall awareness. It will examine the issues and barriers they experience, what the consequences are, what the impact of this is and what considerations should be made for any future provision.

There are many contributing factors including a lack of: access to bi/trilingual modes of communication, funding, appropriately qualified professionals and the social impact on the home & family environment.

All of these add to creating not only isolation from the rest of the Muslim community but also the lack of an Islamic identity.