

## Dr Riyaz Timol

### From Religious Functionaries to ‘Super-Imams’: A Typology of Roles in the British Imamate

Imams are probably the largest group of Muslim religious professionals in Britain who work principally within mosques, leading prayers, delivering sermons and providing guidance to their congregations. Growing evidence suggests that this role has increasingly been expanded to encompass pastoral care, charity work or inter-faith and civic events. The British imam, however, has rarely been the subject of in-depth ethnographic research. Based at Cardiff University’s Islam-UK Centre, ‘Understanding British Imams’ is the largest study ever undertaken of Britain’s Muslim prayer leaders based on several years of fieldwork. Drawing on interviews with 40 imams around the country and survey data collected about more than 2000 imams, this paper highlights the internal heterogeneity of British imams by presenting a typology of common roles. These range from ‘ritual prayer leaders’ working as institutional functionaries to ‘super-imams’ who attract wide followings as inspirational faith leaders. Drawing upon Weber’s notions of ‘rational-legal’ and ‘charismatic’ authority, the paper further unpacks the relationship between imams and mosque management committees in terms of a sliding scale of autonomy. It presents a conceptual model to better understand the nature and manifestations of religious authority in British Islam.



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Dr Timol is a Research Associate at Cardiff University’s Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK. His research interests include ethnographic methodology, intergenerational transmission of Islam in Britain and the relationship of Islam with modernity. His disciplinary approach is within the sociology of religion, with particular reference to the theoretical contributions of Peter L. Berger. He teaches at MA level, supervises several postgraduate students, and helps deliver the innovative online course, *Muslims in Britain: Changes and Challenges*. He is the Principal Investigator of a major four-year project examining the lived experiences of British Imams and the co-editor of a special issue of the international journal *Religions*, exploring ‘*Leadership, Authority and Representation in British Muslim Communities*’.