

# Teaching the Study of Muslim Minorities in Higher Education in the United Kingdom

*Tahir Abbas*

## Introduction

In this paper, I reflect on my experiences of teaching sociology of Islam at an elite British university: the University of Birmingham. As a trained economist with postgraduate degrees in social science and sociology and as a former Whitehall civil servant, my foray into the world of Islamic studies has only been recent. Indeed, it was the events relating to British Muslim minorities between 1999 and 2001 (namely, the arrests, trial, and sentencing in relation to the mostly Birmingham-born “Seven in Yemen” in 1999; the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, DC; and the urban disturbances in northern England 2001) that propelled me to interact with this vast and rich field of learning and scholarship. These three events compounded matters in relation to identity politics, Islamism, and international political economy. Having already researched and written on matters related to education and class,<sup>1</sup> entrepreneurship and culture,<sup>2</sup> and Islamophobia and the print news,<sup>3</sup> my new focus on Muslim minority issues stemmed precisely from my existing interests in ethnicity, culture, and multiculturalism.<sup>4</sup>

Upon joining the University of Birmingham in 2003, I spent my first two years concentrating on teaching a specialized course, “Ethnic Relations in Britain,” to finalists. In 2005, I began to teach a new course, “Islam, Multiculturalism, and the State” to finalists. In this article, I discuss the resulting insight into teaching to a largely non-Muslim audience issues relating to Islam and Muslim minorities.

---

Tahir Abbas is reader (2006-) in sociology, the founding director of the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Culture (2003-) at the University of Birmingham, and a leading authority on ethnic and religious minorities in Britain. In 2007, he was elected to the “Muslim Power 100,” a list of leading Muslim lights in Britain today. His most recent publications include *The Education of British South Asians* (2004); as editor, *Islamic Political Radicalism* (2007) and *Muslim Britain* (2005); and as co-editor, *Immigration and Race Relations: Sociological Theory and John Rex* (2007). His latest book, *British Islam: the Road to Radicalism*, is due out in the spring of 2008. In it, he explores how the policies and practices of multiculturalism and failed foreign policies have negatively impacted on British Muslim minority experiences.

## Curriculum Content and Development

As a British-born Pakistani Muslim growing up in the 1970s, my own education in relation to Islam was never quite ideal. Indeed, I have learned more about Islam later in life than during my early years of attending mosques in local community settings. This new learning has focused on history, politics, economics, sociology, anthropology, and theology. As a result, in class, when it comes to communicating matters in relation to the Qur'an, Sunnah and the hadith, I feel I can only spend one whole session on it. The approach is to ensure that I am at least able to offer an introduction to the religion, its origins and its scriptures, but not to use the opportunity to proselytize or essentialize. The aim is to provide a full enough introduction but to ensure that students have enough direction to be able to further glean insights into Islam on their own. Three important texts here are Barnaby Rogerson's *The Prophet Muhammad: A Biography* (Abacus: 2004) and *The Heirs of the Prophet Muhammad: And the Roots of the Sunni-Shia Schism* (Abacus: 2006), and Maxime Rodinson's *Muhammad* (New Press: 2002).

An important issue beyond that of the course's premise (that it is largely directed towards social science and humanities students within the university), is its content. In my teaching and research on "race," ethnicity, and multiculturalism, I have endeavored to provide an historical background to the many issues at play. Given my own training as a social scientist, I seek to do this in a way that usefully highlights the context and the narrative in relation to how ideas have emerged and spread. In the study of Islam, many things need to be demystified, such as the popular perception that Islam was spread by the sword; that it is expansionary (and jihadi) in nature; that it oppresses women, minorities, and non-Muslims *per se*; and that it will not rest until it has achieved complete control of the world.

These perceptions are fed directly and indirectly to students who are, in everyday terms, just as likely to be misinformed by the media and popular political discourses as are most other people in society. My role is to clarify as well as encourage students to think for themselves. In relation to Islam's origins, this certainly entails analyzing the religion from a sociological, political, economic, cultural, and theological perspective. Essentially, the literature here needs to be secular, agnostic, and Islamic, as this reflects the nature of the students as well as of British society.

Furthermore, without an Islamic perspective that suggests that Islam is divinely inspired, one cannot present a complete picture, irrespective of the students' dominant belief systems. Therefore, an important goal is to ensure that the students receive a complete and full analysis of historical events and

their interpretation, as this will lay the seeds of analytical thinking that will leave them in good stead throughout the remainder of the course.

After my students realize that Islam is a religion like any other, one born out of the drive by individuals and groups with an inspired message of hope, redemption, and salvation, we move on. But not before they are aware that it emerged out of pagan Arabia. Once an initial appreciation of its origin is presented, it is important to trace the early years, particularly its expansion beyond the Arabian peninsula. Moreover, the important literary and scientific contributions made during Islam's "golden age" (750-1258) need to be relayed to the audience.

Of this era's many key writers and thinkers, Ibn Khaldun stands out as one of the originators of modern sociological thinking. It is only right that students be given a more detailed insight into this important figure.<sup>5</sup> Other notable authorities include Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina, Ibn Farabi, and Ibn Battuta, who provide an insight into early Islamic thinking in relation to medicine, science, philosophy, and geography, respectively. Mention of other thinkers in mathematics, astronomy, zoology, engineering, and alchemy are also given weight, as it is important for students to appreciate that during the dark ages of western Europe, the centers of learning, science, and technology were in Muslim lands, particularly in parts of southern Europe and the Middle East.<sup>6</sup>

Having grasped the fundamentals and essentials of Islam's origins and the contributions it made during its golden age, it is important to identify how some of it began to go horribly wrong. With an empire far too large for the center to maintain, regional outposts began to develop. As a result, cultural fusion took place with the indigenous peoples who were either conquered or willingly came to Islam. The example of the Mughals in India is notable here, as is the experience of Muslim Spain and Muslim Persia. This helps students appreciate the rich diversity in the people who make up Islam and how they came to be so.

But problems emerged when despotism and looking inwards caused Islam to regress, and this affected the Muslims. At the time when Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) was writing, his thesis on civilization's rise and fall and notion of *asabiyah* (community cohesion) could be rightly applied to Islam. Sectarian divisions began to emerge, and violent conflict and retribution became the order of the day. The religious leadership discouraged the use of *ijtihad* (individual interpretation), the printing presses were closed, and the clergy seized all religious authority, much as their Christian counterparts did in Europe.

In addition, part of the problem was how northern European Christians began to better organize themselves and become technologically and mili-

tarily superior. By the end of the fifteenth century, Islam was effectively ejected from southern Europe and Christianity became the single dominant force. When Granada was finally sacked in 1492, Isabella of Castille and Ferdinand of Aragon had already formed a strategic alliance. With their daughter, Catherine, marrying Henry VIII of England, European Christendom was now better collected than ever before.

The advent of imperialism and colonialism, as well as their impact on the Muslim world, is vividly told to the students, who can better appreciate the importance of these historical facts and their conceptualization as the oppression of subjugated peoples and cultures. In particular, the discussion focuses on the British role in India as an acute example. India was arguably the richest nation on the planet before the British arrived; but upon their exit in 1947, it was torn up and turned into one of the poorest.<sup>7</sup> The importance of France in Algeria; Spain in Morocco; Italy in Libya; Britain in Egypt, Sudan, and India; and the Netherlands in Indonesia all illustrate the impact of colonial powers on subjugating the Muslim mind while providing Europeans with a somewhat warped view of the Islamic world. At one point in time, virtually all Muslim lands were under colonial administration.

Over the roughly 500 years between the end of Islam in Europe and the two world wars, some important interactions between Islam and the “Sceptred Isle” occurred. Queen Elizabeth I, a daughter of Henry VIII, developed strong links with Ottomans to help fend off Catholic Europe’s Armada. Furthermore, throughout this period prominent Muslims came to Britain and made their mark. The first shampoo parlor, coffee houses in London, and an important servant of Queen Victoria were all Muslims. There are many examples of building up communities in Liverpool, Sheffield, Cardiff, and London, whether through Lascars who worked on the merchant ships or established indigenous converts who led communities to build mosques and institutions to serve Muslims. Instances here include Lord Henley’s conversion and the building of Woking Mosque in 1889, which was built with a donation from Nawab Begum Shah Jahan of Bhopal, an Indian princely state. The involvement of Muslims in communities, politics, and public life adds to an appreciation of their role in British history.<sup>8</sup>

Of even greater importance is the need to focus on the study of colonialism and relations with Muslim “others,” as this is the precursor of South Asian Muslim immigration to Britain in the post-war period (as with the North Africans going to France, the Turks to Germany, and the Surinamese to the Netherlands, and so on). Through understanding Orientalism, students can grapple with how the “other” is objectified, racialized, and stigmatized in society. The precursor of modern-day Islamophobia, defined as the fear or

dread of Islam, has its roots in Orientalism. How majority Britons regard and relate to Muslims, both at home and abroad, is based on these notions, and it is useful for the students to understand how and why this has come about.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the course focuses on the study of post-war Muslim minorities. My goal is to ensure that students appreciate the nature of the diversity that exists today. Certainly, with the 2001 census asking the religious identity question for the first time since 1850, we have an accurate demographic picture of the nature of British Muslim minorities.<sup>10</sup> And, as such, the term's second half is spent mapping out the nature of socioeconomic disadvantage and, in particular, looking at the experience of education, employment, housing and health.<sup>11</sup> A focus on criminality, given the recent impact of the anti-terrorist legislation enacted after 9/11 and 7/7, is also provided to highlight inequality statistics as well as perceptions in relation to policing, intelligence, and security.<sup>12</sup>

The second term is a basket of semi-related issues and concepts that give students a better appreciation of the issues involved in recent periods. Here, the theory of Orientalism and many of its criticisms are laid out in full. Lectures on how Muslims are represented in the print news, how they and Islam are represented by Hollywood,<sup>13</sup> the nature of changing ethno-religious identities among Muslim minorities and how they are a function of social class and social mobility, ethnicity, sect, gender as well as international political economy are also included. The area of Islamic feminism is vast, and I provide one session on this subject, again largely introducing students to the field.<sup>14</sup>

After the mid-term break, we explore notions of public policy and governance in relation to Muslim minorities, in particular how being a Muslim relates to existing race equality policy and practice, which is relatively advanced in the British context.<sup>15</sup> The question of radicalization, something that has interested students, academics, and policymakers alike since 7/7, is the focus of the discussion, which explores the local, national, and international dynamics related to its manifestation.<sup>16</sup> Much credence is given to the concept of the *ummah* (global family), and how current notions of globalization are impacting upon this construct is explored in earnest. The role of global communication media technologies are important to discuss here.

Finally, I present the current state of play in relation to the concerns of multiculturalism and Muslim minorities in Britain. What are the key issues for a citizenry and its polity? What practical steps are Muslim minorities taking to better integrate themselves into society without it seemingly impacting on their desire to be good Muslims? What is the state's role in light of the "war on terror" away from home and the impact of anti-terrorist legislation closer to home? What is the global Muslim community's role as regards fos-

tering a sense of ease with Islam and its relations with non-Muslim “others”? These ongoing questions inform everyday interests among students, academics, journalists, civil servants, and elected officials, and it appears that they will remain important for some time to come.

This course seeks to provide open-minded students every opportunity to explore their interests in this area. To be able to do so, however, they need to understand the discussion’s historical contexts and nuances. In effect, these two terms offer the backdrop to the Muslims of Britain; the second one asks more culturally specific questions and enters into debates on every aspect of their wider sociological training and development, namely, history, politics, philosophy, and scientific method. The process by which this can occur also relates to pedagogy, process, and cognition. As a result, a whole host of visual and audio material is utilized, along with a vast library of materials.

In addition, as part of my role as director of the Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Culture, a wide variety of lectures, seminars, colloquia, and symposia on related matters are held regularly, and students are encouraged to attend. The fact that many of the areas they wish to write about are live and current, with daily developments to stories helping to add further insight, means that willing students are never short of material to act as stimuli or as a case study.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

In presenting my observations, thoughts, and experiences in relation to teaching Islam and the experiences of Britain’s Muslim minorities my course is highly topical and actively engages me in primary research. Being of Muslim minority status myself and growing up in 1970s and 1980s Britain gives me an added insight not normally afforded to educators.<sup>17</sup> But there is also a feeling of tremendous responsibility that one cannot easily let go. I do not indoctrinate my students in any way, but at the same time I ensure that they receive a complete a spectrum of ideas and opinions on the subject matter so that they become fully aware and capable of making up their own minds.

This is not always easy, as I myself have my own prejudices (pet theories, if you like) as regards Islam, politics, gender, and international relations. And so what we have is an evolving process of teaching and learning both by the students and myself, bearing in the mind the dynamic pace of events. It is an exciting time to be researching, writing, and teaching in this area, and it is quite clear that it will remain so for the foreseeable future. Therefore, one must keep an open, critical, objective, rational, and balanced perspective – both for the sake of the academy and for that of the individual and collective human spirit.

## Endnotes

1. T. Abbas, *The Education of British South Asian: Ethnicity, Capital and Class Structure* (Palgrave: 2004).
2. M. Ram, T. Abbas, B. Sanghera, G. Barlow and T. Jones, “‘Apprentice Entrepreneurs’? Ethnic Minority Workers in the Independent Restaurant Sector,” *Work, Employment & Society* 15, no. 2 (2001): 353-72.
3. T. Abbas, “Media Capital and the Representation of South Asian Muslims in the British Press: An Ideological Analysis,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2001): 245-57.
4. T. Abbas, “After 9/11: British South Asian Muslims, Islamophobia, Multiculturalism, and the State,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 21, no. 3 (2004): 26-28.
5. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, tr. F. Rosenthal (Princeton: Bollingen, 1967).
6. Z. Sardar and Z. A. Malik, *Introducing Muhammad (Beginners)* (London: Totem, 1994).
7. C. Bennett, *Victorian Images of Islam* (London: Grey Seal, 1993).
8. N. Matar, *Islam in Britain: 1558-1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
9. E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 2003); T. Abbas, “Media Capital and the Representation of South Asian Muslims in the British Press: An Ideological Analysis,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 21, no. 2 (2001): 245-57.
10. C. Peach, “Muslims in the 2001 Census of England and Wales: Gender and Economic Disadvantage,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29, no. 4 (2006): 629-55.
11. T. Modood et al. *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage* (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1997).
12. M. Rai, *7/7: The London Bombings and the Iraq War* (London: Pluto, 2007); N. M. Ahmed, *The London Bombings: An Independent Inquiry* (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2006).
13. The Hollywood movies focused on here include “Delta Force” (dir. Menahem Golan, 1986), “True Lies” (dir. David Cameron, 1993), “The Siege” (dir. Edward Zwick, 1998), and “Syriana” (dir. Stephen Gaghan, 2004).
14. F. Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (New York: Saqi, 2003).
15. T. Abbas and M. Anwar, “An Analysis of Race Equality Policy and Practice in the City of Birmingham,” *UK, Local Government Studies* 31, no. 1 (2005): 53-68.
16. T. Abbas, “A Theory of Islamic Political Radicalism in Britain: Sociology, Theology and International Political Economy,” *Contemporary Islam*, forthcoming.
17. T. Abbas, “A Question of Reflexivity in a Qualitative Study of South Asians in Education: Power, Knowledge, and Shared Ethnicity,” *Ethnography and Education* 1, no. 3 (2006): 319-32.