

Muslim Women Teachers, Faith, and Pedagogical Agency: Navigating Racialised Schooling in England

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Research Article

Keywords: Muslim women teachers, lived religion, Muslim identity, Islamophobia, institutional life, faith-informed practice, United Kingdom

Posted Date: October 22nd, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10007357/v1>

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

This paper examines how Muslim women teachers in England navigate racialised and secular schooling environments through faith-informed practices. While existing research has often focused on Muslim students or policy frameworks, less attention has been paid to the lived experiences and professional agency of Muslim educators themselves. Drawing on autoethnographic scenarios and qualitative interviews with four Muslim women teachers working in secondary schools in England, the study explores how faith shapes routine responses to visibility, representation, and institutional discourse.

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The findings show that participants mobilise faith-informed values such as care, patience, and ethical responsibility to engage with students, challenge stereotypes, and negotiate their position within institutional contexts shaped by Islamophobia and policy surveillance, including the Prevent agenda. Religion emerges not simply as an identity marker but as an ethical and relational resource that informs professional judgement and everyday interaction. Through strategies of disclosure, discretion, and cultural mediation, participants exercise agency within constrained institutional contexts while supporting dialogue and mutual understanding.

Conceptually, the paper draws on intersectional and feminist scholarship while remaining attentive to critiques of secular frameworks that marginalise religious forms of agency. Rather than assuming participants' identification with feminist labels, the study conceptualises their practices as a form of faith-informed praxis grounded in lived experience. By foregrounding Muslim women teachers' voices, the paper contributes to sociological understandings of Muslim life in contemporary Britain and proposes faith-informed praxis as a lens for understanding how religious values are translated into everyday professional action within institutional settings.

Introduction

Despite increasing scholarly attention to Muslim life, identity, and belonging in Western contexts, the everyday experiences of Muslim professionals navigating institutional environments remain under-examined. In the context of British schooling, research has often focused on Muslim students, educational policy, or public debates surrounding Islam, with comparatively less attention paid to how Muslim educators themselves experience, negotiate, and shape institutional spaces through their professional practice (Osler, 2003; Zine, 2006; Davids, 2014). This absence is notable given the visibility of Muslim women teachers and the particular pressures they face within predominantly secular and often racialised environments.

Muslim women teachers in England work within a broader socio-political context shaped by Islamophobia, ethnic stereotyping, and heightened policy surveillance through initiatives such as the Prevent agenda (Osler, 2003; Abbas & Iqbal, 2024; Reed & Rees, 2024). These conditions can intensify

experiences of visibility, scrutiny, and representational burden, particularly for those whose religious identity is marked through dress or practice. At the same time, institutions frequently position religion as a private matter, creating tensions for individuals whose faith informs not only their identity but also their ethical orientation, values, and everyday interactions. Understanding how Muslim women teachers navigate these dynamics provides important insight into how Muslim identity is lived, negotiated, and enacted within professional settings in contemporary Britain.

In recent years, public and political discourse surrounding Muslim communities in the UK and across Europe has been shaped by intensifying debates around security, integration, migration, and national identity. These developments have contributed to renewed scrutiny of Muslim identities in public and institutional life, often positioning Muslim individuals within narratives of risk, incompatibility, or cultural tension (Faith Matters, 2025; Siyech, 2025). Such dynamics are not confined to media or policy alone but are lived and negotiated in everyday settings, including schools, where broader societal discourses can permeate institutional interactions and expectations. For Muslim women in particular, visibility remains a key axis through which these tensions are experienced, with religious markers such as the hijab attracting both hypervisibility and misrecognition. As Hussein (2023), demonstrates, Muslim women's visibility in public and institutional spaces is frequently tied to forms of performative scrutiny, requiring ongoing negotiation of identity and belonging. These conditions highlight the need to examine how Muslim identity is not only represented but actively lived and negotiated within institutional environments, where individuals must respond to overlapping expectations of professionalism, neutrality, and social belonging.

This paper focuses on the lived experiences and agency of four Muslim women teachers working in secondary schools in England, examining how they described responding to racialised and religiously charged encounters in their everyday professional lives. Rather than framing Muslim women as passive subjects of discrimination or policy, the study foregrounds participants' active roles as professionals who draw on faith-informed practices to engage with others, foster dialogue, and negotiate their position within institutional contexts. In doing so, it shifts attention from abstract debates about religion and secularism to the situated realities through which Muslim identity is enacted within everyday institutional life.

Drawing on autoethnographic scenarios and qualitative interviews with four Muslim women teachers, the study explores how faith operates not simply as an identity marker but as an ethical and relational resource. Participants' accounts reveal how religious ethics, lived experience, and professional judgement inform their responses to everyday interactions, institutional silences, and moments of misrecognition. These practices include relational and dialogic approaches that challenge stereotypes and create spaces for reflection and mutual understanding (Davids, 2014).

Conceptually, the paper draws on insights from intersectional and feminist scholarship to examine the entanglements of gender, race, religion, and professional identity, while remaining attentive to critiques of secular frameworks that marginalise religious forms of agency (Nyhagen, 2019). In addition, recent

work on lived religion emphasises how religious identity is actively negotiated through everyday practices and institutional engagements rather than solely through belief or formal observance (Allievi & Calabretta, 2025). While some of the practices discussed resonate with concerns articulated within Islamic feminist thought - such as justice, care, and resistance to racialised and patriarchal norms (Badran, 2011), - the paper does not assume that participants identify with feminist labels. Instead, it uses the notion of faith-informed praxis as an interpretive lens to understand how religious commitments shape action, meaning-making, and interaction within secular institutional contexts.

The paper addresses the following research question:

How do Muslim women teachers draw on faith-informed practices to navigate racialised and secular schooling environments in England?

By centring Muslim women teachers' voices and experiences, this study contributes to sociological understandings of Muslim life in contemporary Britain, highlighting how faith is experienced and negotiated in everyday institutional settings.

Theoretical Framing: Intersectionality, Religion, and Faith-Informed Praxis (Revised)

This study is theoretically informed by intersectional and feminist scholarship on religion, identity, and lived experience, with particular attention to how faith shapes everyday practice within institutional contexts. Rather than positioning theory as a set of fixed categories applied to participants' lives, theoretical concepts are used interpretively to illuminate how participants described navigating intersecting expectations related to gender, race, religion, and professional identity in their everyday interactions. This approach foregrounds lived religion, aligning with scholarship that emphasises practice, meaning-making, and context over abstract categorisation (Zine, 2006; Davids, 2014).

Intersectionality, originating in Crenshaw's (1989) work, provides a framework for understanding how multiple structures of power operate simultaneously, shaping experiences that cannot be understood through single-axis analyses. Subsequent scholarship has extended intersectional analysis to consider race, gender, class, and nation, while also highlighting the relative absence of religion as a sustained analytic category within intersectional and feminist research, particularly in secular Western contexts (Bilge, 2010; Mirza, 2013; Nyhagen, 2019). For Muslim women, religion is frequently racialised and politicised, positioning faith not only as belief but as a visible marker subject to surveillance, misrecognition, and contestation.

In recent years, scholarship on Muslim women's visibility has further demonstrated how religious and gendered identities are negotiated within public and institutional spaces. Hussein (2023) for example, highlights how Muslim women's visibility in British contexts is often shaped by "performative" expectations, in which individuals are required to manage how they are seen, interpreted, and assessed within broader racialised and gendered frameworks. Such work underscores how visibility operates both as constraint and as a site of agency, requiring ongoing negotiation of identity, belonging, and legitimacy

across everyday social interactions. These dynamics are particularly salient within institutional environments, where expectations of neutrality and professionalism intersect with broader social discourses surrounding Muslim identity.

While intersectionality provides an important analytic starting point, it does not on its own fully capture how religion functions as a source of ethical orientation, meaning-making, and everyday practice. Recent scholarship on lived Islam has emphasised how Muslim identities are actively negotiated through everyday interactions, practices, and institutional engagements rather than solely through belief or formal observance (Allievi & Calabretta, 2025; Jones, 2024). This body of work highlights the importance of examining how religion is enacted in context, as individuals interpret and mobilise faith within socially and politically structured environments. Such perspectives are particularly relevant for understanding how Muslim women navigate visibility, agency, and representation within Western institutional contexts, where religion is often both scrutinised and marginalised.

In educational and professional settings, Muslim women often encounter overlapping forms of marginalisation linked to gendered Islamophobia, racialisation, and institutional expectations of neutrality or secular professionalism (Osler, 2003; Zine, 2006; Reed & Rees, 2024). Intersectionality is therefore used in this study to examine how these dynamics co-produce particular forms of visibility, scrutiny, and representational responsibility. Importantly, this lens also enables attention to agency within constraint, highlighting how individuals actively interpret, negotiate, and respond to these conditions rather than simply being shaped by them. This aligns with feminist critiques that caution against framing Muslim women's practices solely in terms of oppression or resistance, and instead emphasise complexity, negotiation, and situated action (Mahmood, 2011; Davids, 2014).

Feminist scholars of religion have also critiqued the tendency of secular frameworks to position religion primarily as a site of constraint, thereby overlooking the ways in which faith can inform agency, care, and justice-oriented practice (Mahmood, 2011; Nyhagen, 2021). These critiques are particularly salient in contexts where Muslim identities are shaped by public narratives of suspicion and incompatibility, requiring individuals to navigate both external Islamophobic discourses and internal expectations related to gender, respectability, and representation (Mirza, 2013; Hussein, 2023).

Insights from Islamic feminist scholarship are therefore drawn on in this study as an interpretive resource rather than a prescriptive or identity-based framework. Islamic feminism encompasses diverse and contested efforts to articulate gender justice through faith-based ethics and critiques of patriarchal and colonial knowledge structures (Badran, 2011; Seedat, 2013; Salem, 2013). However, the term remains contentious, and many Muslim women resist feminist labels due to their association with secular, Western, or culturally alienating traditions (Moghissi, 1999; Nyhagen, 2019). Recognising this, the present study does not assume that participants identify as feminist or Islamic feminist, nor does it seek to categorise their practices as such.

Instead, the concept of faith-informed praxis is used to capture how participants draw on religious values, lived experience, and situational judgement in responding to everyday encounters within

institutional contexts. While intersectionality helps illuminate the structural conditions within which participants operate, and scholarship on lived religion highlights how faith is negotiated in everyday life, neither framework fully captures the process through which religious commitments are translated into professional action. The concept of faith-informed praxis is therefore used to foreground the relationship between belief, ethical reflection, and situated practice. It directs analytical attention to how participants draw upon religious values when making judgements, responding to institutional challenges, and engaging with students and colleagues in everyday professional contexts.

As an analytical concept, faith-informed praxis makes visible the practical enactment of faith within institutional life. Rather than treating religion primarily as identity, belief, or discourse, it focuses on how religious ethics are interpreted and mobilised through action. This enables examination of the ways participants transform faith-based commitments into pedagogical practices of care, dialogue, dignity, and responsibility, even within environments where religious expression may be constrained or subject to scrutiny.

This includes relational and care-based practices, dialogic engagement, and ethical commitments to dignity and justice that resonate with concerns articulated in Islamic feminist thought, while remaining grounded in lived experience. Framing these practices as praxis emphasises both action and reflection, attending to how individuals make meaning of their experiences and translate them into everyday practice.

By combining intersectional analysis with attention to lived religion and faith-informed praxis, this study moves beyond binary framings that position religion and feminism, or faith and professional life, as inherently opposed. The framework developed here allows for a nuanced understanding of how Muslim women navigate visibility, constraint, and agency within institutional environments. In doing so, it contributes to sociological understandings of Muslim life by centring lived religious practice, everyday negotiation, and the dynamic ways in which faith is enacted in contemporary contexts.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design to explore how four Muslim women teachers navigate and respond to racialised and religiously charged encounters within school environments in England. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to examining lived experience, meaning-making, and identity in relation to faith, where knowledge is contextual, relational, and situated (Reinharz, 1992; Naples, 2007). The study combines autoethnographic scenarios with semi-structured interviews to capture both insider reflection and participants' perspectives on shared professional and everyday experiences.

This methodological approach aligns with feminist and sociological scholarship that emphasises reflexivity, voice, and the centrality of lived religion in understanding social life (Zine, 2006; Davids, 2014).

Rather than seeking generalisable or representative claims, the study provides analytic insight into how faith-informed practices are formed and enacted within specific institutional contexts. It foregrounds the situated experiences of the participants in this study to illuminate how professional practice may be shaped by context, lived religion, and ethical judgement.

Autoethnographic Scenarios

Autoethnography formed a central component of the research design, drawing on the researcher's professional experiences as a Muslim woman working in secondary schools and higher education settings in England. Over a period of approximately thirteen years, informal reflective journals were maintained, documenting everyday interactions, critical incidents, and conversations with students and colleagues. These reflections were not initially collected as research data but later became a resource through which recurring patterns related to Islamophobia, visibility, representation, and institutional interaction were identified.

The scenarios were developed from these long-term professional experiences and accompanying reflective notes. Rather than being selected through a formal process of identifying recurring journal entries, the scenarios emerged from moments that remained analytically significant across different stages of professional practice. Many concerned identity negotiation, stereotyping, racialised encounters, religious visibility, and pedagogical decision-making. These experiences were treated as analytically generative rather than anecdotal, providing insight into the everyday ways religion, race, and professional identity intersected within educational settings.

The resulting scenarios were constructed as short narrative accounts designed to retain the relational and ethical tensions of the original encounters while protecting anonymity. Their purpose was not to reproduce events verbatim but to create recognisable prompts capable of eliciting reflection and discussion. In some cases, identifying details were removed or contextual information was modified to protect confidentiality, while preserving the substantive dynamics of the interaction. The scenarios therefore function as reflective reconstructions grounded in lived experience rather than documentary records of specific events.

Four scenarios were ultimately selected for use in participant interviews because they aligned closely with the study's focus on visibility, representation, racialised interaction, and institutional life, and because they provided opportunities for participants to reflect on situations that resonated with their own professional experiences.

Role of Autoethnographic Scenarios

The scenarios, developed from the researcher's reflective engagement with recurring professional experiences, served three distinct methodological functions within the study. First, they constituted a form of autoethnographic data derived from the researcher's reflective journals and professional reflections and therefore formed part of the wider empirical dataset. Second, they functioned as

interview elicitation tools. Rather than asking participants abstract questions about religion or discrimination, the scenarios provided concrete situations through which participants could reflect on similarities, differences, and alternative responses emerging from their own professional experiences. Third, selected scenarios are presented within the findings as illustrative vignettes. In this role, they are not treated as independent evidence but as contextual devices that help situate participants' accounts and demonstrate the kinds of encounters under discussion. Distinguishing these functions is important because the analytical emphasis of the study rests primarily on participants' interpretations and responses to the scenarios, rather than on the scenarios themselves in isolation.

Participants and Recruitment

Four Muslim women teachers working in secondary schools in the North West of England participated in the study. Participants were recruited through professional networks using convenience sampling, allowing access to a group with relevant lived and professional experience (Lewis et al., 2004). While this sampling strategy has limitations in terms of representativeness, it was appropriate for a study focused on depth, reflexivity, and experiential insight rather than breadth.

Participants varied in age, teaching experience, subject specialism, and religious expression, including both hijab-wearing and non-hijab-wearing teachers. These differences were significant in shaping participants' experiences of visibility, disclosure, and representation in institutional settings. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying details were removed to protect confidentiality. Ethical approval was granted by a UK university, and all participants provided informed consent prior to participation.

Interviews and Data Generation

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting between one and one and a half hours. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interviews took place in informal settings, including coffee shops in and around Manchester, in order to foster a relaxed and conversational atmosphere. Interview questions explored pathways into teaching, experiences of representation and visibility, encounters with prejudice or stereotyping, and tensions between professional, religious, and gendered identities.

At the start of each interview, participants were presented with a selection of the autoethnographic scenarios and invited to choose those that resonated with their own experiences. Scenarios were not shared with participants in advance. Instead, they were introduced at the beginning of each interview, allowing participants to read and select those they felt connected with through their own professional experiences. This approach was intended to minimise rehearsed responses and encourage participants to engage with the scenarios through their own interpretations and experiences.

Epistemologically, the use of autoethnographic scenarios reflects an interpretivist understanding of knowledge as relational and co-constructed. The scenarios were not intended to verify the factual

accuracy of particular events but to facilitate discussion around experiences that participants recognised, challenged, or reinterpreted. Meaning was therefore generated through participants' engagement with the scenarios rather than residing solely within the original journal entries. This approach enabled exploration of both shared and divergent understandings of racialised and religiously mediated encounters in professional life. The autobiographical origins of the scenarios were disclosed only after participants had engaged with them, minimising the imposition of the researcher's interpretation and supporting a more participant-led discussion.

The scenarios functioned primarily as elicitation tools rather than fixed scripts, encouraging participants to articulate their own interpretations, emotions, and responses. This approach offered participants agency in shaping the discussion and enabled comparison between the researcher's reflections and participants' own accounts. The scenarios were selected for interview use because they aligned closely with the study's focus on visibility, representation, religion, and racialised interaction in educational contexts.

Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher occupies an insider position as a Muslim woman and former teacher, sharing religious, cultural, and professional identities with participants. This positionality facilitated rapport, trust, and depth of discussion, particularly where participants reflected on sensitive experiences involving Islamophobia, racism, or professional vulnerability. At the same time, insider research requires careful reflexivity to acknowledge potential assumptions, biases, and power dynamics (Berger, 2015; Miled, 2017).

Throughout the research process, reflexive practice was maintained through ongoing journaling and analytic memo-writing, attending to how shared identities shaped data generation and interpretation. As Yip (2023) notes, insider-outsider positions are fluid rather than fixed; while shared identity enabled access and understanding, analytic distance was deliberately maintained during thematic analysis to ensure rigour and ethical responsibility.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a reflexive thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Rather than applying a pre-determined coding framework, themes emerged inductively across autoethnographic scenarios and interview transcripts through repeated reading, coding, and reflection. Analytical attention focused on moments where religion, identity, and institutional interaction intersected, particularly in relation to encounters, questioning, and institutional silences.

Themes were generated through iterative engagement with the data, moving between individual accounts and the broader socio-institutional context in which they were situated. Researcher subjectivity was treated as an analytic resource rather than a limitation, consistent with feminist methodological approaches that value reflexivity and co-constructed meaning (Reinharz, 1992; Gannon, 2017). The

resulting themes form the basis of the findings presented in the following sections, illustrating how participants described navigating and enacting faith-informed practices within racialised and secular institutional environments.

During analysis, the scenarios and interview transcripts were initially coded separately before being considered together. This enabled distinctions to be maintained between the researcher's autoethnographic reflections and participants' accounts while also identifying areas of convergence and divergence across the dataset.

The findings presented in the following sections arise from inductive and reflexive engagement with both the autoethnographic scenarios and the interview data. Through thematic analysis, two interconnected themes emerged that capture patterns across participants' accounts of navigating and responding to racialised and religiously charged encounters in school settings. These themes do not represent fixed categories but rather analytically meaningful patterns identified within the accounts of the four participants in this study. They reflect participants' lived experiences, professional judgements, and everyday practices and illustrate how these participants described faith as a resource shaping their responses to visibility, representation, and institutional discourse.

Findings

Theme 1: Racialised Visibility and the Burden of Representation

This theme examines how the four Muslim women teachers participating in this study described experiencing and negotiating racialised visibility within predominantly secular and often majority-white institutional contexts. Participants described how their visibility - whether marked through religious dress, perceived ethnicity, or assumed religious affiliation - positioned them as representatives of Islam and Muslim communities. These moments of hypervisibility frequently carried an unspoken burden of representation, requiring ongoing negotiation of disclosure, identity, and interaction in everyday professional life. Rather than withdrawing from these encounters, participants drew on faith-informed values and relational practices to navigate misrecognition, manage expectations, and reshape interactions in meaningful ways.

Negotiating Visibility and Disclosure in Everyday Classroom Encounters

Autoethnographic Scenario 1, 'Miss, are you a Muslim?', illustrates how seemingly ordinary student questions can reveal narrow and essentialised understandings of Muslim identity. In this scenario, students repeatedly questioned the teacher's identity on the basis of visible markers-specifically the absence of the hijab-expressing surprise when their assumptions were not confirmed. The interaction unfolded as a series of probing questions, reflecting an underlying expectation that Muslim identity is both externally visible and uniformly expressed. Such moments reveal how Muslim womanhood is often reduced to recognisable signs, positioning the teacher within a narrow framework of legibility and requiring her to negotiate whether and how to disclose aspects of her identity.

The participants in this study described adopting deliberate pedagogical responses to these encounters, although the specific strategies varied across individual accounts. Yasmin, who does not wear the hijab, spoke about using personal storytelling to humanise herself and subtly challenge students' assumptions, rather than offering direct correction:

I try to be very inspirational in that way and let an understanding develop ... I think it makes me more human towards them. And I think in being a Muslim there is an added pressure to be your best. (Yasmin)

Yasmin's response reflects an ethically grounded pedagogical choice, where disclosure is managed carefully to build trust and challenge stereotypes without positioning herself as a spokesperson for all Muslim women. Her account highlights how faith-informed values such as patience and relational care shape classroom practice, even when religion is not explicitly discussed.

In contrast, Zaynab, who wears the hijab, described embracing her visible identity as part of her pedagogical approach. Rather than perceiving visibility solely as a vulnerability, she framed it as an opportunity to support students' understanding of religious difference:

If they understand me more, they're going to understand my religion and other religions more acceptingly... having those talks helps them deal with questions they wouldn't ask anybody else. (Zaynab)

Zaynab's account illustrates how visibility can be re-worked as pedagogical resource, enabling open conversation and critical reflection. Her faith-informed practice does not involve imposing belief, but instead centres dialogue, mutual learning, and ethical responsibility - key features of what this paper conceptualises as faith-informed pedagogical praxis.

Hypervisibility, Emotional Labour, and the Burden of Representation

While some participants experienced visibility as enabling, it also carried emotional costs. Autoethnographic Scenario 2, 'What does a terrorist look like?', captures how Islamophobic assumptions can surface within classroom discussion, particularly in the context of topics related to extremism. The scenario emerged during a lesson in which students were invited to reflect on representations of terrorism, prompting responses that implicitly associated Muslim identity with threat. The question itself, while framed as part of classroom dialogue, revealed an underlying expectation that Muslimness is visually identifiable and inherently suspicious. For the teacher, this moment required an immediate and careful response, balancing the need to challenge harmful assumptions while maintaining a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Such encounters illustrate how racialised discourse positions Muslim individuals within logics of suspicion, requiring them to manage not only their own visibility but also the potential emotional impact on Muslim students. In responding to this moment, the teacher drew on faith-informed values of care and responsibility, reframing the discussion in ways that resisted stereotyping while preserving openness and dialogue. This interaction reflects broader societal dynamics in which Muslim identities are subjected to scrutiny and simplified through reductive

associations with violence. Yasmin reflected on the emotional impact such discussions could have on visibly Muslim pupils:

If there was a hijabi in the room, that student would potentially be in tears because of this classroom discussion. (Yasmin)

Her response illustrates how participants in this study described extending pedagogical care beyond curriculum delivery to include emotional safeguarding, particularly for students who shared aspects of their religious identity. This form of care, informed by both professional ethics and faith-based values, involves anticipating harm and intervening to create safer learning environments.

Aminah similarly observed that her presence in the classroom altered student behaviour:

They think about how they're going to question me. They almost take a step back and think. (Aminah)

While this suggests a level of respect, it also points to heightened scrutiny and emotional labour. Being perceived as a representative of Islam requires constant negotiation of tone, response, and self-presentation. Participants described feeling responsible not only for their own professionalism, but also for managing wider perceptions of Muslims. This responsibility was frequently expressed through practices of care, emotional restraint, relationship-building, and explanation, suggesting that representational labour was shaped by both religious visibility and gendered expectations surrounding women's conduct and professionalism.

Sabah's account illustrates how this burden can lead to selective concealment. Although her school accommodated religious practice, she chose not to disclose her Muslim identity openly:

Would I be comfortable being seen in a hijab praying in front of my students? Most certainly not ... I think because I don't do the hijab, I don't have my students know that I'm Muslim. (Sabah)

Sabah's decision reflects a strategic negotiation of visibility shaped by perceived risk and professional vulnerability. Her account underscores that faith-informed praxis does not always manifest through overt expression; it can also involve discretion and boundary-setting as means of self-preservation within racialised environments.

Gendered Expectations, Care, and Professional Responsibility

Participants' accounts suggest that experiences of religious visibility were intertwined with broader expectations associated with care, mentoring, and professional responsibility. While these expectations were not always explicitly identified as gendered by participants themselves, their narratives frequently described forms of relational and emotional labour extending beyond formal teaching duties.

Several participants described a heightened sense of responsibility towards students who might share aspects of their religious identity or experience marginalisation within school settings. Reflecting on a

classroom discussion involving stereotypes about Muslims, Yasmin expressed concern about the impact such conversations could have on visibly Muslim pupils:

"If there was a hijabi in the room, that student would potentially be in tears because of this classroom discussion." (Yasmin)

Rather than focusing solely on classroom management, Yasmin's account highlights an attentiveness to students' emotional wellbeing and the potential consequences of racialised discourse within educational settings. Her response suggests a form of pedagogical care that extends beyond curriculum delivery to include the protection and support of vulnerable students.

Participants also described assuming responsibilities associated with mentorship and representation. Zaynab reflected on her role within the school community:

"I feel like a role model, and I can teach my children and I can help them understand life experiences as a Muslim ... as a British Muslim growing up." (Zaynab)

This sense of responsibility positioned her not only as a subject specialist but also as a source of guidance and support for students navigating questions of identity and belonging.

Similarly, Yasmin described her efforts to cultivate understanding through relational engagement:

"I try to be very inspirational in that way and let an understanding develop ... I think it makes me more human towards them." (Yasmin)

Her account reflects a commitment to relationship-building and dialogue, emphasising connection and understanding as important dimensions of professional practice.

Participants also described carefully managing their own visibility within school environments. Sabah, for example, expressed discomfort with being publicly identified through religious practice:

"Would I be comfortable being seen in a hijab praying in front of my students? Most certainly not ..." (Sabah)

Elsewhere, she emphasised that she had kept aspects of her identity and practice "very professional". These reflections point to ongoing processes of self-monitoring and boundary management, shaped by concerns about how religious identity might be interpreted within professional settings.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that participants' experiences were shaped not only by racialised religious visibility but also by expectations of care, representation, emotional management, and professional conduct. These forms of labour frequently extended beyond formal teaching responsibilities and formed an important part of how participants navigated their roles within school environments.

Reframing Representation Through Pedagogical Care

Across the four narratives analysed here, participants frequently described attempts to reframe moments of misrecognition through pedagogical care rather than confrontation. Whether through storytelling, dialogue, or thoughtful disclosure, participants' responses suggest efforts to challenge essentialist understandings of Muslim women while maintaining relational integrity in the classroom. These practices resonate with Martinez-Cuadros and Giorgi's (2025), concept of Muslim women as "double ambassadors", navigating expectations from both wider society and their own communities while exercising agency in how they are seen and understood. Participants' accounts similarly suggest ongoing negotiation between external representations of Islam and responsibilities associated with representing Muslim identities within everyday social and institutional contexts.

Rather than engaging in overt activism, participants' responses exemplify everyday, faith-informed pedagogical praxis grounded in care, dignity, and justice. By drawing on religious ethics and lived experience, these participants reframed racialised visibility from a site of constraint into an opportunity for learning, fostering classroom environments in which difference could be explored critically and empathetically.

Theme 2: Cultural Mediation and Countering Racialised Policy Discourses

This theme examines how participants in this study described assuming, or being positioned in, roles resembling cultural mediation within school environments shaped by racialised policy discourses and institutional silences around Islam and race. Participants described how they were often positioned - implicitly or explicitly - as intermediaries between students, school staff, and wider societal narratives about Muslims. This role was intensified by policy frameworks such as the Prevent agenda, which participants felt contributed to suspicion, surveillance, and the problematisation of Muslim identity in educational spaces. In response, participants drew on faith-informed pedagogical practices to challenge deficit narratives, protect students from harm, and foster critical engagement with issues of identity, belonging, and justice.

Responding to Racialised Assumptions Through Pedagogical Dialogue

Participants frequently encountered student questions grounded in racialised and gendered assumptions about Muslim women, particularly around lifestyle, morality, and embodiment. Autoethnographic Scenario 3, 'Miss, do you drink?', captures how seemingly casual student questions can surface deeper assumptions about Muslim identity, morality, and difference. The interaction emerged during an informal classroom exchange in which students moved from curiosity to probing questions about the teacher's personal life, framing practices such as abstaining from alcohol as unusual or restrictive. This line of questioning revealed implicit expectations that Muslim identities are defined through rigid moral codes, positioning the teacher as both culturally and socially "other." As the exchange developed, students' responses reflected a broader association between Muslim identity and constraint, occasionally slipping into language that echoed wider narratives of suspicion and fear.

In this moment, the teacher was required to navigate not only the immediate interaction but also the underlying assumptions shaping it, balancing the need to respond openly while resisting reductive interpretations of Muslim life. Rather than disengaging, she drew on faith-informed values to reframe the discussion, emphasising shared experiences and common ethical ground. This response suggests how participants in this study negotiated everyday encounters that blurred boundaries between personal identity and public scrutiny, reframing potentially divisive interactions as opportunities for dialogue and reflection. Such interactions reflect broader dynamics in which Muslim identities are rendered visible and interpretable through dominant social narratives, requiring ongoing negotiation and reinterpretation within institutional settings. Rather than responding with reprimand or withdrawal, participants described using these moments as openings for pedagogical dialogue. Aminah reflected on her approach to such encounters, emphasising the importance of highlighting shared human values:

I think they see it from a different perspective. (Aminah)

Her response illustrates how participants in this study described engaging in cultural mediation by reframing difference through commonality, encouraging students to reflect on their assumptions without shutting down conversation. These accounts suggest a faith-informed ethic of dialogue and patience in which pedagogical engagement was prioritised even in the face of discomfort or prejudice.

These interactions suggest that participants' pedagogical agency operated not only at the level of curriculum but also through spontaneous, relational encounters. By choosing to engage rather than disengage, participants described practices that challenged racialised narratives while maintaining inclusive learning environments.

Navigating the Prevent Agenda and Institutional Surveillance

Policy discourses, particularly those associated with the Prevent agenda, emerged as a significant contextual factor shaping participants' experiences. Autoethnographic Scenario 4, 'The Prevent Agenda', illustrates how Muslim students, and by extension Muslim educators, can become subjects of heightened scrutiny based on visible markers of religious identity. Participants did not generally describe direct engagement with Prevent procedures themselves. However, several reflected on broader institutional and public discourses surrounding counter-extremism policies, which they perceived as contributing to heightened scrutiny of Muslim identities within educational settings.

Yasmin, for example, reflected on the expectation that she should respond to acts of extremist violence because of her Muslim identity:

"Why did you physically feel the need to come to me and ask me what I make of [the attack]?... when you're a Muslim, you feel like the act of an extremist is... something that you need to apologise for..."

While not referring directly to Prevent procedures, her account illustrates how wider counter-extremism discourses can position Muslim educators as subjects of explanation and accountability. Participants' reflections suggest that such expectations formed part of the backdrop against which everyday

interactions, perceptions of visibility, and professional judgements were negotiated. Prevent therefore appeared less as a direct procedural intervention in participants' accounts than as part of a broader climate in which Muslim identities were frequently read through narratives of risk, scrutiny, and representation.

Zaynab reflected on the broader implications of these dynamics, suggesting that prejudice cannot be addressed solely through classroom intervention:

"I don't think it's just integration that's going to solve the issue ... it comes from the media, and you've got to educate the parents." (Zaynab)

Her comment highlights an awareness of the wider social discourses that shape young people's understandings of Muslim identity. Rather than locating prejudice solely within individual attitudes, she points to broader narratives circulating through media and public culture that influence how Muslims are perceived and understood. This broader context resonates with participants' reflections on the heightened visibility and scrutiny associated with Muslim identities in contemporary educational settings.

In the classroom, Zaynab described working against such narratives through open discussion and personal testimony. When she recounted a racist incident to her students, their responses created a moment of collective reflection:

"Their strength was amazing, they were so supportive." (Zaynab)

This example illustrates how one participant responded to wider climates of suspicion and stereotyping through relational and dialogic engagement. While participants did not generally discuss direct involvement with Prevent procedures, their reflections suggest that broader surveillance-oriented discourses formed part of the backdrop against which classroom interactions were negotiated. Zaynab's approach demonstrates how personal testimony and dialogue may be used to challenge assumptions and encourage critical reflection on racism, belonging and responsibility.

In participants' accounts, the influence of Prevent-related discourse was experienced not through formal policy encounters but through expectations of explanation, heightened representational responsibility, and an awareness that Muslim identities were subject to particular forms of scrutiny within educational settings.

Emotional Labour, Accountability, and Faith-Informed Resistance

Participants also described the emotional labour involved in being held accountable for global or national events associated with Muslim extremism. Yasmin's account of staffroom conversations illustrates how this burden extended beyond the classroom:

When you're a Muslim, you feel like an act of extremism is something you're guilty for and need to apologise for ... we're not all like this. (Yasmin)

This sense of racialised guilt reflects institutional misrecognition, where Muslim educators are implicitly positioned as explainers or defenders of violence they unequivocally reject. In response, Yasmin described intentionally introducing positive representations of Muslims and Muslim contributions into her teaching, countering deficit narratives within curricular and informal educational spaces.

Across participants' narratives, cultural mediation emerged as a form of faith-informed resistance enacted through care, dialogue, and ethical responsibility. Participants' accounts suggest that engagement, rather than withdrawal, functioned as a means of negotiating harmful assumptions while safeguarding their own well-being and that of their students. These practices were not framed as overt activism, but as everyday pedagogical choices shaped by religious values, professional ethics, and lived experience.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that faith-informed pedagogical praxis enabled participants to navigate the intersection of policy, pedagogy, and identity. Participants' responses indicate that racialised policy discourses could be reworked into opportunities for dialogue, reflection, and critical engagement, creating educational spaces that challenged surveillance-oriented narratives and supported more inclusive forms of interaction.

Discussion

Given the small, non-representative sample, the discussion that follows is intended as an interpretation of the experiences described by the four participants rather than a basis for generalising to Muslim women teachers as a whole.

This study set out to explore how the four Muslim women teachers participating in this study drew on faith-informed practices to navigate racialised and secular institutional environments in England. Across both themes, participants' accounts suggest that religion operated, for these four teachers, not simply as an identity marker but also as an ethical and relational resource shaping everyday interaction, professional judgement, and responses to misrecognition. By examining situated encounters alongside broader policy and institutional contexts, this discussion interprets how these participants negotiated visibility, representation, and responsibility within contemporary institutional life.

Faith as an Ethical and Relational Resource in Institutional Contexts

Across both themes, participants in this study described ways in which faith informed their pedagogical responses to moments of misrecognition, discomfort, and racialised scrutiny. In Theme 1, religious values such as patience, care, and dignity shaped how these participants approached questions of religious identity and visibility, enabling them to engage students in dialogue rather than defensiveness.

In Theme 2, these values informed participants' responses to more explicitly politicised encounters, including Islamophobic assumptions and the surveillance logic associated with the Prevent agenda.

Importantly, faith was not mobilised as doctrinal instruction or moral imposition. Instead, participants described drawing on religious ethics to guide relational practice - listening, dialogic engagement, and attentiveness to students' emotional safety. This contributes to broader scholarship on lived religion by demonstrating how faith functions as an active and embodied dimension of everyday life, rather than a private or marginalised identity (Zine, 2006; Davids, 2014). These accounts suggest that faith may function as a form of pedagogical praxis that challenges dominant secular assumptions that position religion as incompatible with professional authority or inclusive education.

The concept of faith-informed praxis is particularly useful here because it moves analysis beyond questions of identity or religious affiliation alone. These participants were not simply describing themselves as Muslim; they were drawing upon faith as a resource for action. Their accounts suggest an ongoing process in which religious values informed professional judgement, classroom interaction, decisions about disclosure, and responses to racialised encounters. Faith-informed praxis therefore captures the relationship between ethical commitment and everyday action, making visible dimensions of professional practice that might be overlooked if religion were understood solely as identity, belief, or cultural background.

While this study is situated within British schooling, the dynamics identified reflect broader patterns shaping Muslim experiences in contemporary institutional contexts. Increasing scrutiny of Muslim identities within public discourse, alongside policy frameworks associated with surveillance and security, has contributed to environments in which Muslim individuals are frequently required to account for or explain their identities (Faith Matters, 2025; Reed & Rees, 2024). The experiences described by participants therefore extend beyond education, illustrating how faith, identity, and professional practice are negotiated within wider social conditions of visibility, contestation, and belonging.

Intersectional Constraints and Pedagogical Agency

An intersectional reading of participants' experiences highlights how gender, race, religion, and professional identity intersected to produce distinctive forms of visibility and burden for the four teachers in this study. The participants interviewed for this study frequently described being positioned as representatives of Islam and expected to account for, explain, or counter wider societal narratives while simultaneously navigating institutional expectations of neutrality and professionalism. These pressures were not experienced uniformly, however, suggesting that the effects of racialisation were mediated by factors such as religious visibility, professional context, and individual approaches to disclosure and identity management.

Rather than viewing agency as something exercised outside or against institutional constraints, participants' accounts suggest that agency was enacted through ongoing negotiation within them. Their responses indicate that pedagogical agency operated as a form of situated judgement, expressed

through decisions about when to disclose, when to engage, and how to respond to moments of scrutiny or misunderstanding. In this sense, agency emerged not through overt resistance alone but through the practical management of competing institutional, professional, and ethical expectations.

This interpretation extends feminist critiques that challenge binary distinctions between oppression and resistance (Mahmood, 2011). Rather than depicting Muslim women teachers as either constrained by institutional structures or actively resisting them, these participants' accounts point to more nuanced forms of action characterised by negotiation, mediation, and ethical deliberation. From this perspective, pedagogical agency can be understood as a relational practice through which individuals navigate structural constraints while simultaneously reshaping the meanings and interactions that those constraints make possible.

Gendered Professional Expectations and Institutional Context

Participants' accounts suggest that gender operated not only as an aspect of identity but also as a structural dimension of professional life. While the findings primarily foreground religion, race, and visibility, they also point to the gendered expectations embedded within educational work. Across participants' narratives, professional responsibilities frequently extended beyond subject teaching to include emotional support, mentoring, relationship-building, and the management of difficult conversations. These forms of labour were often described through faith-informed values of care, patience, and responsibility, but they were also shaped by wider professional expectations associated with teaching as a relational and caring profession.

An intersectional reading suggests that participants negotiated multiple and overlapping forms of expectation. They were not only positioned as Muslims within racialised institutional contexts but also as women expected to undertake forms of emotional and relational labour that are often normalised within educational settings. Participants described supporting vulnerable pupils, acting as role models, facilitating dialogue, and carefully managing how they presented themselves within school environments. These responsibilities extended beyond formal teaching duties and formed part of their everyday professional practice.

The burden of representation discussed throughout the findings can therefore be understood as constituted through both religious and gendered expectations. Participants were frequently positioned as approachable explainers, cultural mediators, and sources of support for students seeking to understand questions of identity, belonging, and difference. At the same time, some accounts pointed to the importance of professional self-monitoring and respectability, particularly where religious visibility was perceived as potentially subject to scrutiny or misunderstanding. These dynamics suggest that participants' experiences were shaped not simply by Muslim visibility but by the interaction of religious, racialised, gendered, and professional expectations.

Attention to these gendered dimensions strengthens the intersectional analysis developed in this study. Rather than treating gender as a demographic characteristic alongside religion, the findings suggest that

gender formed part of the institutional context through which participants' experiences were organised and interpreted. The care, mentoring, and representational work described by participants demonstrates how professional agency was exercised within a field of expectations shaped simultaneously by gender, faith, and racialisation.

Cultural Mediation, Emotional Labour, and Ethical Responsibility

A key contribution of this study lies in its conceptualisation of cultural mediation as a form of institutional labour undertaken within racialised school environments. Rather than simply transmitting information about Islam or Muslim identities, the participants interviewed for this study appeared to occupy positions in which they translated meanings, negotiated misunderstandings, and managed tensions arising from broader social and political discourses surrounding Muslims. Cultural mediation therefore functioned not merely as an interpersonal activity but as a mechanism through which participants navigated the interface between institutional expectations, student understanding, and public narratives about Islam.

Viewed in this way, the emotional labour described by these participants can be understood as structurally produced rather than individually chosen. Responsibilities such as protecting Muslim students from harm, managing personal vulnerability, responding to expectations of accountability, and undertaking forms of relational care emerged from participants' positioning within racialised institutional contexts. The labour involved was therefore not incidental to teaching but formed part of the conditions through which professional roles were enacted and negotiated.

Faith-informed pedagogical praxis provided an ethical framework through which participants interpreted and responded to these demands. Rather than understanding care, dialogue, and boundary-setting as solely professional competencies, these participants' accounts suggest that such practices were infused with moral and religious significance. This finding extends research on Muslim women educators by demonstrating how faith may operate not only as an aspect of identity but also as a resource for navigating institutional expectations and sustaining professional agency within environments shaped by suspicion and scrutiny (Osler, 2003).

More broadly, these findings suggest that Muslim professionals may be required to undertake forms of representational and relational labour that remain largely invisible within institutional accounts of educational work. The experiences described by participants therefore invite greater attention to how racialised and religiously marked identities shape the distribution of emotional responsibility within contemporary educational settings.

Rethinking Islamic Feminism Through Pedagogical Praxis

While participants did not explicitly identify with feminist or Islamic feminist labels, their practices resonate with concerns articulated within Islamic feminist scholarship, including justice, dignity, and resistance to racialised and patriarchal norms (Badran, 2011; Seedat, 2013). Rather than positioning

Islamic feminism as an identity category, this study reframes it as a lens for understanding faith-informed pedagogical action.

This reframing highlights a potential limitation in approaches that locate feminist agency primarily through explicit political or ideological identification. Participants' accounts suggest that commitments commonly associated with feminist concerns may be enacted through everyday professional practice without necessarily being articulated through feminist language. Their actions indicate that forms of agency centred on care, representation, dialogue, and ethical responsibility can emerge from religious commitments as well as from explicitly feminist frameworks.

Conceptualising these practices as faith-informed pedagogical praxis therefore allows for a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of Muslim women's agency in education. The concept shifts analytical attention from questions of identity affiliation to questions of practice, examining how religious values are translated into professional action within institutional contexts. In doing so, it becomes possible to recognise forms of gendered agency that might otherwise remain obscured when feminist self-identification is treated as a prerequisite for feminist action.

This approach responds to critiques of secular feminist frameworks that marginalise religious forms of agency, offering an alternative that centres lived experience and professional practice (Nyhagen, 2019). More broadly, it suggests that faith and feminism need not be understood as competing analytical categories. Instead, participants' accounts indicate that religious commitments can provide resources through which women interpret, negotiate, and challenge marginalisation within secular institutions, even when those actions are not explicitly framed in feminist terms.

Taken together, the findings suggest that faith-informed praxis operates as a mechanism through which participants negotiated the intersection of institutional constraint and professional agency. Faith functioned not merely as a marker of identity but as a practical framework for interpreting experiences, managing visibility, and responding to racialised expectations. Viewed in this way, participants' actions can be understood less as isolated responses to discrimination and more as ongoing forms of ethical labour through which professional, religious, and gendered identities were actively negotiated within institutional life.

Implications for Institutional Practice and Contemporary Muslim Life

While based on a small exploratory sample, the findings offer insight into how some Muslim professionals may navigate institutional environments shaped by racialisation, surveillance, and expectations of neutrality. Recognising faith as an ethical and relational resource challenges deficit frameworks that position religious identity as risk or incompatibility. Institutional settings should create space for individuals to reflect on how faith, values, and professional responsibilities intersect in practice, rather than encouraging forms of concealment or neutrality that can exacerbate marginalisation.

Furthermore, the findings underscore the need to critically examine the impact of policy frameworks such as Prevent, acknowledging how surveillance-oriented approaches shape not only institutional practices but also the everyday experiences and sense of belonging of Muslim individuals. Participants' accounts illustrate how these four Muslim women teachers negotiated these pressures through forms of care, dialogue, and ethical engagement.

By foregrounding the experiences of the Muslim women teachers participating in this study, this research contributes to sociological understandings of Muslim life in contemporary Britain. Participants' accounts highlight how faith was not simply held as belief but actively negotiated, enacted, and sustained within institutional settings shaped by racialisation, surveillance, and public discourse. In doing so, the study offers insight into how Muslim subjectivity may be formed through everyday interaction, constraint, and agency, and into the ways religion can remain a meaningful and active dimension of social life within contemporary institutional contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored how four Muslim women teachers drew on faith-informed practices to navigate racialised and secular institutional environments. By centring lived experience, the paper suggests that religion functioned not merely as an identity marker but also as an ethical and relational resource shaping interaction, professional judgement, and responses to misrecognition. Through autoethnographic scenarios and interview data, the analysis highlights how participants negotiated visibility, representation, and responsibility, offering insight into the ways Muslim identity was experienced and enacted within contemporary institutional contexts.

Across the two themes, participants demonstrated how faith-informed praxis operates through care, dialogue, and reflexivity. In contexts where Muslim identities are often hyper-visible and problematised, participants exercised agency through everyday practices - whether by engaging openly with questioning, practising strategic discretion, or countering racialised assumptions shaped by policy and public discourse. These findings reveal the nuanced ways in which Muslim women navigate institutional constraints while actively shaping ethical and relational forms of engagement.

Conceptually, the study contributes to sociological understandings of Muslim life by foregrounding lived religion as an active and embodied dimension of social practice. While some participants' experiences resonate with themes in Islamic feminist scholarship, the analysis does not impose fixed labels. Instead, it highlights how values such as justice, dignity, and care are negotiated and enacted within everyday institutional contexts. In doing so, the study proposes faith-informed praxis as a useful analytical lens for understanding how religious values are translated into professional action, drawing attention not only to belief and identity but also to judgement, practice, and ethical engagement. This offers insight into the ways in which faith is sustained, interpreted, and mobilised within contemporary social life.

The study also underscores the importance of recognising how policy frameworks such as Prevent shape the experiences of Muslim individuals within institutional settings, influencing both interaction and

perceptions of belonging. Participants' accounts illustrate how these dynamics are navigated through forms of ethical engagement and relational practice, pointing to the need for a more nuanced understanding of Muslim subjectivity within contexts marked by surveillance and public scrutiny.

This study is based on interviews with four Muslim women teachers recruited through convenience sampling in one region of England. The findings should therefore be understood as context-specific accounts rather than representative of Muslim women teachers more broadly. The study does not claim to capture the diversity of experiences, identities, or professional contexts among Muslim educators. Instead, it offers an exploratory analysis of how these participants described drawing on faith-informed practices to navigate racialised schooling environments. Future research involving larger and more diverse samples could examine the extent to which similar patterns emerge across different educational settings and geographical contexts.

By centring the voices and experiences of the participants in this study, this paper highlights how faith, identity, and agency were negotiated within contemporary institutional life. More broadly, it demonstrates how religious commitments can function as resources for professional judgement, care, and ethical action within environments shaped by racialisation and scrutiny. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on lived religion, belonging, agency, and the ongoing significance of Islam as a meaningful and enacted dimension of social experience.

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