

Article

Reconciling British Values with Professional Identity: The Pursuit of Ontological Security Among Muslim Teachers in England [†]

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Abstract: This article aims to investigate how the legal requirement to promote fundamental British values (FBVs) impacts Muslim teachers' professional identity formation, utilising Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-identified Muslim teachers, including both male and female individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, employed in secondary schools across England. This study seeks to interpret Muslim teachers' experiences through Anthony Giddens' ontological security theory. Firstly, Muslim teachers expressed pride in being British and their successful integration into society. Secondly, the meaning of Britishness was elucidated by the participants through references to the values described in the current government guidelines on promoting FBVs. Finally, the impact of the obligation to promote FBVs on the professional identity formation of Muslim teachers points to a degree of ambivalence rooted in seeking ontological security. Certain teachers adopted an uncritical stance towards FBV policy, prioritising 'values' within the debate and thereby normalising the discourse surrounding FBVs. In contrast, others engaged in a critical analysis of FBV rhetoric, highlighting its adverse impact on academic discussions and their professional identities. From the perspective of ontological security theory, Muslim teachers are situated in a fragile position; while the majority grapple with ontological insecurity, others exist in a realm between ontological security and insecurity.

Keywords: teacher identity; British values; British Muslim



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1. Introduction

British Muslim communities have long been the focus of debate regarding Britishness, shared values, and a sense of belonging. Historically, pivotal debates such as those concerning Muslim schools, the Satanic Verses affair, the Northern riots of 2001, and the 9/11 and 7/7 London terrorist attacks have significantly shaped the narrative surrounding Muslimness in Britain (Cantle 2012; Fazakarley 2017; Miah 2017; Modood 1992). In particular, the summer of 2001 witnessed riots in northern English towns like Oldham, Bradford, and Burnley, where large Muslim populations resided. These events drew attention to the issues of British Muslims' national identity, belonging, and loyalty while sparking discussions about self-segregation (Kundnani 2007; Thomas 2011). The Cantle Report, commissioned to investigate the causes of the summer riots, contended that these communities exhibited minimal commonalities and led parallel lives (Home Office 2001). This also highlighted the importance of shared values, intercultural dialogue, and a sense of Britishness (Home Office 2001). As a result, the theory of community cohesion emerged as a new paradigm for managing cultural diversity (Home Office 2001). Furthermore, it has been argued that the riots in the north of England facilitated the subjection of Muslim communities to securitisation practices (O'Toole 2019). In a similar vein, Martin (2019)

criticised community cohesion policies for being integral to counter-radicalisation efforts that marginalised certain identities, particularly those of British Muslims.

However, the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, in the United States further perpetuated the stigmatisation of Muslims as a global threat (Poynting and Mason 2008), while the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005, executed by British-born individuals, intensified concerns regarding home-grown terrorism (Abbas 2008; Mythen et al. 2009). This resulted in heightened scrutiny of British Muslims, with multiculturalism being criticised for contributing to social segregation (Modood 2013). During the Munich Security Conference in 2011, previous Prime Minister David Cameron explicitly criticised multiculturalism, contending that it had failed and facilitated the emergence of segregated communities that undermined social cohesion (Cameron 2011). Cameron also introduced the concept of ‘muscular liberalism’, a policy that emphasises the active promotion of liberal values such as freedom and equality, in contrast to the passive tolerance inherent in multiculturalism (Cameron 2011). He further argued that Muslims in Britain, particularly young Muslims, were struggling to identify with Britishness and emphasised the promotion of shared values (Cameron 2011).

Following these breaking moments, the Teachers’ Standards were introduced in 2012, later revised in 2013, incorporating a legal obligation “not [to] undermine fundamental British values” (FBVs) defined as “democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs” (DfE 2012, p. 9). The statutory obligation to promote FBVs was initiated to realise the “civic rebalancing agenda—where greater social harmony can be realized through emphasizing a stronger commitment to Britishness as a core identity” (Keddie 2014, p. 540). In other words, promoting FBVs involves creating a sense of national identity that is separate from cultural connections but deeply rooted in Britishness, leading to enhanced social cohesion within society (Vincent 2019). However, the origin of the concept of FBVs can be traced back to the definition of extremism delineated in the Prevent duty introduced in June 2011 (DfE 2012). According to Revell and Bryan (2018), the inclusion of FBVs into teachers’ professional standards has accelerated the heightened politicisation of the teaching profession.

Furthermore, the Trojan Horse affair in Birmingham in 2014 catalysed a new discourse concerning Muslim teachers in England. Issues including Britishness, shared values, belonging, and professionalism were sceptically scrutinised over Muslim teachers, but the debate has subsequently moved to a wider political spectrum, with British Muslims as its subject (Holmwood and O’Toole 2018). As a consequence of this affair, educational institutions where the majority of students and staff are Muslim have been portrayed as disengaged from mainstream Britishness (Martin 2019). These educational institutions and ‘certain’ teachers are alleged to propagate a certain way of life and to make this ethos dominant in the school, thus not sufficiently fostering shared values among the pupils (Miah 2017). Unsubstantiated allegations also led to the dismissal of a cohort of Muslim teachers from the profession (Holmwood and O’Toole 2018). It is possible to argue that the Trojan Horse affair had a traumatising impact on Muslim teachers nationwide, leading to the securitisation of their professional identity (Dilek 2024).

The affair in question sparked extensive debates regarding the responsibility of educational institutions in countering extremist and radical ideologies. Moreover, the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 introduced a legal requirement for teachers to implement measures aimed at preventing students from being exposed to or involved in acts of terrorism (Home Office 2015). In particular, recent debates surrounding Michaela School have reignited discussions about Muslimness, secularism, and multiculturalism. A Muslim pupil at Michaela School in London lost his High Court case against the school’s refusal to allow him to pray, marking a potential end to multiculturalism. It is argued that paradoxically, this decision, made at a time when freedom of belief and freedom of expression are considered essential components of British values, will further expose Muslim students and teachers to Islamophobic practices and potentially lead to the criminalisation of Muslim identity (Asbali 2024). Furthermore, In March 2024, a redefined framework for extremism

was issued by the government, characterised as follows: “the promotion or advancement of an ideology based on violence, hatred or intolerance, that aims to:

1. negate or destroy the fundamental rights and freedoms of others; or
2. undermine, overturn or replace the UK’s system of liberal parliamentary democracy and democratic rights; or
3. intentionally create a permissive environment for others to achieve the results in (1) or (2)”([Home Office 2024](#)).

The justification for the new definition has been attributed to concerns regarding the spread of extremist ideologies, which are anticipated to intensify following the October 7. An additional significant point to consider is that the originator of this revised definition is Michael Gove, recognised for his association with the Trojan Horse affair and previously noted for making speculative remarks about British Muslims. This contentious definition, akin to its predecessor, has faced criticism for potentially compromising freedom of expression ([MEND 2024](#)). Under this definition, the interpretation of extremism—an already complex issue for teachers—may evolve into an even more intricate and challenging process.

Yet the question of how such a political atmosphere constructs the experience of Muslim teachers has not been adequately answered. This article specifically aims to fill this gap by critically examining the impact of the legal obligation to promote FBVs on the professional identity of Muslim teachers in England.

In a sociological inquiry of Muslim teachers in England, ‘religious identity’ naturally might hold more prominence than ‘professional identity’. While acknowledging this, professional identity remains central to this study. It is, therefore, useful to provide an overview of the broader aspects of teacher professional identity rather than a strict definition. The theoretical comprehension of the concept involves (a) a dynamic and ongoing process in which experiences undergo continuous interpretation, (b) significant influence from individual factors, professional setting, and the political atmosphere, (c) a close intertwining with racial, ethnic, gender, and religious identities, and (d) a close relationship with teacher agency ([Akkerman and Meijer 2011](#); [Beijaard et al. 2004](#)). This conceptualisation encapsulates the multifaceted nature of a teacher’s professional identity and “provides a framework for teachers to construct their own ideas of ‘how to be’, ‘how to act’ and ‘how to understand’ their work and their place in society” ([Sachs 2005](#), p. 15).

The significance of researching Muslim teachers lies in the political debates that revolve around their religious identities, which form an integral part of this study. Regarding the impact of the policy on teachers’ professional lives, Muslim teachers’ perceptions of FBVs have been the subject of some inquiries. For instance, Muslim teachers articulated reservations regarding FBVs, challenging their portrayal as “anti-extremist watchdogs” due to concerns about the potential marginalisation of Muslim youth that FBVs may lead to ([Panjwani 2016](#), p. 337). Furthermore, Muslim teachers drew attention to the potential negative consequences of FBVs on academic discussions ([Panjwani 2016](#)). Moreover, an alleged conflict between Islamic and British values was not acknowledged by Muslim teachers, but rather they argued that the two were in harmony ([Panjwani 2016](#)).

[Farrell and Lander \(2019\)](#) also conducted a study to understand Muslim Religious Education (RE) teachers’ perception of FBVs, incorporating Foucault’s analysis of power. They observed that Muslim RE teachers did not oppose the values associated with FBVs; however, Muslim teachers suggested the necessity of purifying these values from their nationalist connotations by emphasising their universal aspect ([Farrell and Lander 2019](#)). Additionally, [Farrell and Lander \(2019\)](#) argued that FBVs might contribute to institutional racism, positing that the discourse surrounding FBVs could lead to the alienation of Muslim teachers from their professional roles. They highlighted how Muslim teachers have become more vulnerable in the contemporary political landscape compared to their colleagues ([Farrell and Lander 2019](#)).

This article will commence with an exploration of ontological security theory. Subsequently, it will delve into an explanation of the methodological approach employed in this

research. Ultimately, it will conclude with the section dedicated to presenting the findings and engaging in discussion along with ontological security theory.

2. Ontological Security Theory

The idea of ontological security originally introduced by Scottish psychiatrist R.D. Laing in 1960, garnered scholarly interest due to its focus on the impact of social elements alongside biological factors on the sense of well-being. Laing characterises an ontologically secure individual as one who possesses “a sense of his presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person” (Laing 1990, p. 39). However, British sociologist Anthony Giddens, who expanded upon the concept of ontological security, elucidated it as a sense of order and continuity concerning the individual’s actions, that is “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action” (Giddens 1990, p. 92). While the individual occupies a central place in Giddens’ conceptualisation, this does not imply an experience devoid of the influence of the social context.

A sense of trust is fundamental in establishing ontological security from the early stages of an individual’s life (Giddens 1991). A foundational sense of security is predicated upon the individual’s trust relationships with others and institutions (Giddens 1991). In this way, the individual is alleviated of existential anxieties and attains psychological well-being (Giddens 1991). These relationships of trust function as a “protective cocoon” safeguarding and shielding the individual from the dangers encountered in daily life, thereby enabling the individual to maintain a stable sense of self (Giddens 1991, p. 40).

According to Giddens, trust in “abstract systems”, specifically symbolic tokens (such as money) and expert systems (such as institutions and professionals), plays a crucial role in shaping our daily decisions and actions (Giddens 1991, p. 134). Individuals seek to have confidence in these abstract systems and their proper functioning to alleviate existential anxieties. Otherwise, the undermining of confidence in these systems threatens the individual’s ontological security (Giddens 1991).

Human beings inherently question the material world, the meaning of life, and the fundamental dimensions of existence (Giddens 1991). The existential uncertainties in individuals’ lives have notably escalated, particularly in the context of modernity and globalisation, rendering the quest for ontological security more pronounced (Giddens 1991). The advent of high modernity has cemented a reinforcement of dominance by certain groups over others through enhanced surveillance mechanisms, thereby accentuating societal inequalities (Giddens 1991). According to Giddens (1991), comprehending ontological security necessitates an examination within the framework of high modernity. Thereby, in seeking answers to these uncertainties, individuals may be guided by collective identities, such as religious or national affiliations (Croft 2012, Giddens 1991, Kinnvall 2006).

Concerning the role of collective identity Croft (2012) delves into the search for ontological security within the framework of Britishness. According to Croft (2012), Britishness as an ongoing and unfixed presence has historically relied on the presence of the ‘other’ to identify itself. With the presence of the ‘other’, Britishness leaves its interlocutor with an image of what it is or is not. The sense of self will be constructed through a sense of Britishness, and structured through the routines in which a sense of Britishness is performed (Croft 2012). In response to rising the issue of extremism and terrorism, Britishness necessitated a renewed articulation through a new ‘other’; “the problem stemmed from (warped) Islam; the solution was to be more Britishness” (Croft 2012, p. 1). Feeling its existence threatened, Britishness sought to strengthen the narrative around it by promoting shared values, namely British values (Cameron 2011). These values needed to be particularly promoted to young British Muslims, who often struggled to identify with Britishness (Cameron 2011). Indeed, this new imagined identity of Britishness centred itself around another problematic conceptualisation: the imagined “single British Muslim community” (Croft 2012, p. 198). According to Croft (2012), “that ‘single Muslim community’ has two functions in this

identity construction: that of Radical other, to be feared, demonized and destroyed; but also that of Orientalized Other, to be engaged, patronized and led" (p. 198). This constructed Britishness therefore serves as a foundation of ontological security for certain members in the society, whereas it generates ontological insecurity for others (Croft 2012, p. 198).

An ontologically secure individual, who experiences a sense of wholeness and acts in comfort, eventually finds answers to existential questions and "brackets out questions about ourselves, others and the object-world which have to be taken for granted in order to keep on with everyday activity" (Giddens 1991, p. 37). However, the individual's relationship with the 'other' is a crucial point in establishing ontological security (Giddens 1991). The individual desires either to trust the 'other' or to be trusted as an 'other'. Thus, the 'other', which is desired to be known/understood as an existential unknown, about which some existential answers are needed, is closely intertwined with the individual's search for ontological security (Giddens 1991). Moreover, habits and routines are central concepts in the discussion of ontological security (Giddens 1991). Routines are essential for individuals to establish and sustain their actions; individuals seek assurance in the continuity of their habits and routines, as this continuity serves as a defence mechanism against the anxieties that the individual may encounter (Giddens 1991). In summary, ontological security theory is encapsulated in four main dimensions: "sense of biographical coherence", "cocoon of trust structures," "conformity," and "fragility" (Croft 2012, pp. 25–26). These dimensions highlight the centrality of agency in self-identity, reliance on trusted structures, adherence to integrity, and the ongoing awareness of potential fragility despite efforts to maintain ontological security (Croft 2012).

3. Methodology

This research set out to critically assess the promotion of FBVs debate on Muslim teachers' professional identities. To achieve this objective, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was utilised as the qualitative research strategy. IPA focuses on conducting a thorough examination of the lived experiences of individuals, delving into the significance of these experiences to the participants and grasping how participants interpret and give meaning to their experiences (Smith et al. 2009). At a time when Muslim teachers' national identity, sense of belonging and professionalism were being scrutinised, particularly heightened post the Trojan Horse affair, it is crucial to explore the impact of the policy of promoting FBVs on Muslim teachers' professional identities, to unveil their lived experiences and to elucidate the meaning they attribute to these experiences. Aligned with the methodological framework of IPA, the objective is not to generalise the findings but to conduct a microanalysis—a detailed examination of personal experiences from the perspective of those individuals (Smith et al. 2009). IPA does not entirely dismiss macro-level generalisations; however, these macro generalisations become more feasible with the accumulation of similar microanalyses (Smith et al. 2009).

In this respect, in-depth semi-structured interviews were undertaken with self-identified Muslim teachers, encompassing both male and female participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds who are employed in secondary schools across England. This selection criteria also facilitated the inclusion of some variables such as ethnicity, gender, place of residence, and subject area, thereby enriching the sample. Neglecting to consider the impact of these various factors would lead to a less nuanced interpretation of the individual experiences of Muslim teachers. Table 1 below provides a comprehensive description of the participants involved in this study.

For the implementation of the snowball sampling method, this study initiated participant recruitment by contacting the following representative organizations: the Muslim Council of Britain, the Muslim Institute, New Horizons, and the Muslim Teachers' Association. These organizations subsequently recommended potential participants suitable for the research context. Initial contact was established, research background information was provided, and the ethical process was elucidated. Upon agreement to participate, interview dates were scheduled and conducted. Similar procedures were applied to sub-

sequent participants suggested by previous interviewees. Additionally, this research is presented at the Oxford Muslim Research Conference hosted by the University of Oxford in October 2021. Some conference attendees expressed willingness to participate in the study. Consequently, this conference facilitated the identification of additional research participants. Research interviews took place between September 2021 and July 2022, with an average duration of one hour per interview. Only one interview was conducted in a face-to-face format, whereas the remaining interviews were online through Microsoft Teams. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants to ensure the protection of their anonymity and confidentiality and to safeguard their identities throughout this study. A total of 13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted. IPA suggests recruiting three to six participants for undergraduate and master’s research, with three being ideal for detailed analysis at these levels (Smith et al. 2009). The recommended number for doctoral research varies, depending on factors such as this study’s nature, research questions, and data quality (Smith et al. 2009). Larger participant numbers are manageable in doctoral research due to extended analysis time, but increasing the number of participants does not necessarily guarantee improved research quality (Smith et al. 2009).

Table 1. The demographic profile of the participants. Adapted from Dilek (2024).

Participants	Gender	Ethnic Origin	Age	Subject Specialism	Teaching Experience	School Location
Ali	Male	Indian	53	Mathematics	6	Bradford
Mariam	Female	Moroccan	43	Modern Foreign Language	11	London
Sardar	Male	Bangladeshi	48	Mathematics	15	Oldham
Sajide	Female	Bangladeshi	34	English	9	Oldham
Laila	Female	Yemeni	29	Chemistry	5	Oxford
Sana	Female	Pakistani	37	Mathematics	6	Bradford
Farhan	Male	Pakistani	35	Mathematics	4	Oldham
Zia	Male	Pakistani	41	Mathematics	2	Oldham
Tariq	Male	Pakistani	38	Philosophy	15	Leeds
Aisha	Female	Pakistani	49	English	3	Oldham
Hafsa	Female	Bangladeshi	25	Religious study	4	Oldham
Mohsin	Male	Pakistani	42	Science	11	Oldham
Yahya	Male	White British	31	History and Politics	9	London

Interview data underwent analysis in the NVivo software using the six steps of the IPA analysis (Smith et al. 2009). As an international researcher who is part of the ‘majority’ in his homeland, Türkiye, attempting to understand and research the experiences of a ‘minority’ in the UK is indeed a challenging endeavour. The political events and discourses surrounding secularism have profoundly influenced the lived realities of Turkish Muslims over an extended period, whereas noteworthy factors such as the interplay of “race and religion” in political contexts, cultural dynamics, the impact of “settlement and geographical space”, and the complex dynamics of “migration” exert significant influence on the formation and articulation of religious identities among British Muslims (Miah et al. 2020, p. 140). Furthermore, a notable disparity exists in the conceptualisation of the teaching profession between the two nations. While my prior teaching experience in Turkey provided valuable insights, it did not afford a comprehensive understanding of the challenges encountered by Muslim teachers in England. These contextual nuances influencing the perceptions of religious identities, alongside the diverse interpretations attached to the role of the teacher, facilitated an examination of the research procedures through an etic lens.

Conversely, this shared religious identity facilitated an emic perspective, enhancing participants' trust in me as a researcher, while simultaneously fostering a strong rapport and encouraging their active participation and meaningful contributions to this study. To enhance my insider perspective and gain a deeper understanding of the context of teaching in the UK, I undertook a period as a supply teacher in the UK, affording me firsthand exposure to the professional difficulties encountered by teachers. Through such an 'insider' perspective, I was able to grasp the professional experiences of Muslim teachers without bracketing my previous experiences, in line with Heidegger's interpretive phenomenology (Smith et al. 2009). Absent this contextual understanding, delving into the process of professional identity formation would have been cursory and lacking in depth. To conclude, qualitative researchers exhibit some subjective features that can both broaden and restrict their research domain (Quraishi 2008), and it is possible to state that the subjectivity described here does not impede my research process but rather enriches it.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. *Even Though We Are Being British, We Have to Perform Those Characteristics*

There is an empirically weak assertion in political discourse that Muslims in Britain are reluctant to self-identify as British (Thomas and Sanderson 2011; Uberoi and Modood 2010). Moreover, Muslim religious identity is often perceived as a competing force against the formation of national identity in the UK and Europe, while this assertiveness is considered a potential challenge to "the underpinning secular, liberal consensus that permeates the public space" (Miah 2017, p. 22). In this regard, in the UK, it has been argued that an active and assertive defence and promotion of British values is necessary to restore such secular consensus (Cameron 2011; Smith 2016). Putting aside these debates, previous research has unequivocally challenged claims about British Muslims by demonstrating that Muslims in the UK possess a strong sense of belonging and pride in being British (Frampton et al. 2016; Ipsos Mori 2016; Thomas and Sanderson 2011). In this study, Muslim teachers expressed a sense of pride in being British and reported their successful integration into British society. This is clearly articulated in the following narratives:

I am proud of being a British person, proud to live in the UK. [...] The system allows me to become a teacher at such a late age. I appreciate that because we have that system in the United Kingdom to be able to do that. So, I think there is a lot to be grateful for. (Zia)

I am quite easy and comfortable with being a British-born Muslim. I do not find any conflict between being British and being a Muslim. [...] We, on the whole, can practice religion and not feel threatened by practising religion. And there are a lot of British values that Muslim and Islamic values. So, on the whole, I feel comfortable calling myself a British Muslim. I do not have any concerns. (Sana)

Despite having settled in England later in life, Zia has a strong attachment to the British national identity. Based on Zia's narrative, successful integration is more likely to occur when a country fosters economic and social opportunities that empower its citizens to realise their capabilities. The first phase of achieving successful integration involves addressing economic and social issues, whereas the second phase is closely connected to how effectively the state meets the religious and cultural needs of its citizens. Zia's approach exemplifies the first aspect, while the second aspect becomes apparent in Sana's perspective. Sana's professional identity formation is deeply rooted in her connection to Britishness. Sana's viewpoint highlights that providing the necessary provisions for Muslims and eliminating the barriers to fulfilling their religious needs in daily life facilitates the incorporation of national identity. It is essential to consider the constructive influence of a moderate interpretation of secularism on achieving successful integration (Modood 2013). Moreover, the above perspectives do not endorse the claim that British and Islamic values are incompatible with each other, resonating with the other research which revealed that Muslim teachers maintain that FBVs and Islam are not contradictory (Panjwani 2016). Sana takes pride in being both British and Muslim, thereby integrating these aspects with a sense

of self-awareness into her professional identity (Hopkins and Gale 2009). It is also crucial to acknowledge that a robust and secure bond with one's religious identity is instrumental in both enhancing the sense of belonging to national identity and constructing affirmative professional identity. In connection with this, the following observation reveals that the prerequisite for being a good Muslim is first and foremost being a good citizen:

As a Muslim living in the UK, it is important for me to understand where I am as a British individual, but also understand where I am a Muslim as well. Obviously, being a Muslim, you have been taught that you have to obey the land of the law. Otherwise, it does not really work. There is a balance that, at the end of the day, you can be a good Muslim and you can be a good British citizen. Even though we are being British, we have to perform those characteristics. And we have to show those habits and behaviours.
(Sajide)

Having a visible component of Muslim identity, Sajide maintained that being a 'good Muslim' is unattainable without also upholding the responsibilities of a 'good citizen.' She regarded her Muslimness as intertwined with being a responsible citizen who acknowledges and fulfils their obligations. The interconnected understanding of Muslim and British identity has implications for the reconstruction of professional identity. This exemplifies how religious identification can have a constructive influence on the cultivation of a robust British identity (Ipsos Mori 2016). Despite Sajide's confident identification as British, she underscores the necessity of visibly displaying British characteristics in her daily routines and professional engagements, as not doing so could invite scrutiny of her British identity. Sajide's perspective not only refutes unfounded allegations that visible Muslims disclaim their British identity but also affirms previous observations which have found that the religious identities of visible British Muslim youth peacefully coexist with British national identities (Shazhadi et al. 2017). Nevertheless, even though Muslim teachers proudly embrace their British identity, they are at times not acknowledged as British by 'others' due to various factors, including their skin colour. The following observation serves as an example of this:

I came over to the United Kingdom when I was three-and-a-half. So, I knew very little about India. There were a lot of people, sometimes peers, members of the public, and colleagues, who said you are not British because you are not white. And I cannot identify with that. But having said that, even after so many years, I am 53 now, so I have been here almost 50 years in the United Kingdom. I still feel that I am fully integrated into British society. But I still feel a degree of alienness, so alienation as if I am still different.
(Ali)

Throughout the research interview, Ali consistently highlighted his successful integration into British society. Despite this, Ali noted that he still encountered a degree of alienation. This alienation did not arise from his lack of integration or sense of belonging but rather from interactions with classmates, colleagues, or individuals in public settings who implicitly or explicitly questioned his Britishness, particularly due to her skin colour. This perception is driven by the tendency to associate Britishness with racial connotations linked to whiteness (Parekh 2000). While not being acknowledged as British poses its challenges, being viewed as 'other' is identified as the underlying cause of many social issues (Choudhury 2007).

This section demonstrates the deep attachment of Muslim teachers to British national identity and how they have successfully integrated into the wider community. Their perception of Britishness is not in competition with either their religious or ethnic identities. Muslim teachers do not consider the integration of hybrid identities to be an issue (Modood 2003; Ramadan 2009). Muslim teachers' attitudes point to a sense of Britishness that extends beyond integration and alienation to active contribution and service to society. It would, therefore, be inconsistent to portray Muslim teachers as 'risky' and distanced from Britishness (Martin 2019, p. 91). Herein, it is important to note that participants were not questioned in the research interviews regarding their identification as British, their

pride in their national identity, or their level of integration into society, but Muslim teachers often endeavoured to clarify their positionality through these statements.

The findings of this section suggest that the attitudes of Muslim teachers as a reflexive reaction and coping mechanism to what they really are/feel they are (integrated British Muslim citizens) and what they are not/do not want to be portrayed as (radical other, illiberal). Simultaneously, these statements serve the efforts of Muslim teachers to curtail discussions regarding national identity, sense of belonging and loyalty. Similar to Muslimness, Britishness also represents another collective identity that Muslim teachers often refer to find answers to their existential questions (Giddens 1991). This is evident from the consistent emphasis on belonging to the British identity. The affiliation of British Muslims with British identity, their loyalties and their cultural practices have always been a matter of debate. This has often resulted in them being depicted in political and media narratives as being distant from mainstream Britishness, and their lifestyles have often been associated with unfavourable adjectives and deemed inappropriate. According to Giddens (1991), individuals expect their actions to be perceived and accepted as appropriate and rational by fellow society members, at least to a minimal extent, in order to uphold their ontological security. The statement “I am proud to be British” essentially reflects a need for recognition and acceptance by the wider society, which in turn would pave the way for Britishness to become a source of ontological security for Muslim teachers. Muslim teachers’ focus on Britishness is to refute being a “Radical Other” and an “Orientalized Other”, which represents an endeavour to dissolve the distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘other’ (Croft 2012, p. 198). This coping mechanism, where Britishness serves as a protective shield, is the embodiment of Muslim teachers’ endeavour to restore a feeling of safety and trust, preserve their integrity, and alleviate existential anxieties—essentially fulfilling a need for ontological security (Giddens 1991). Muslim teachers in this research frequently emphasise their British identity as a strategy to challenge and refute stereotypes that perceive Muslims, particularly those in Western contexts, as different, foreign, or potentially threatening. Through active engagement with and embodiment of Britishness, Muslim teachers resist these stereotypical labels, distancing themselves from these imposed identities. By focusing on Britishness, Muslim teachers attempt to blur or even dissolve the boundaries between themselves and the broader British society. The emphasis on Britishness, therefore, reflects a deliberate effort by Muslim teachers to align themselves with the mainstream, challenging the exclusionary ‘us versus them’ mentality. Muslim teachers are not merely attempting to superficially assimilate into a cultural identity but are utilising it as a means to regain a sense of stability and respect in their professional lives. By emphasising Britishness, they may be seeking to reaffirm their dignity and integrity in a manner that resonates with both their personal and professional identities, thus mitigating the psychological strain of feeling excluded or ‘othered.’

4.2. *The Shifting Connotations of Britishness*

Describing the core of Britishness and the values it embodies is indeed complex and challenging but it is possible to argue that Britishness is a dynamic, fluid and continually evolving construct that is susceptible to social, historical, and political influences (Farrell 2016; Maylor 2016; Vadher and Barrett 2009). While Britishness historically has been less receptive to ‘diversity’, today, its dynamic nature has facilitated a somewhat more inclusive approach (Parekh 2011; Uberoi and Modood 2012). Moreover, the contemporary interpretation of Britishness is commonly articulated through various factors including “geography, people, national symbols, citizenship, values and attitudes, cultural habits and behaviour, language and historical achievements” (Commission for Racial Equality 2005, p. 18). In this investigation, participants tended to articulate the meaning of Britishness in a way that mirrors values such as “democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs,” as delineated in the current Teachers’ Standards Guidance on promoting FBVs (DfE 2012, p. 9). This is depicted by the following observation:

I would say being British for myself would be able to have my say, living within a democracy, and making sure that my rights and if they are not that I have the ability to express that my rights are not being met or in that sense. I would say that this is what being British would mean to me. It is about having that freedom as a citizen in this country. (Hafsa)

Hafsa suggests that the essence of Britishness encompasses upholding democracy and the freedom of speech. According to Hafsa, being British is intricately linked with an understanding in which fundamental rights and freedoms are protected and all democratic responsibilities are fulfilled. Instead of merely referring to these values, it is possible to suggest that Hafsa has integrated them into her lifestyle and professional practice, embodying them in both personal and professional contexts. Conversely, it would be assertive to maintain that every member of British society has an equal opportunity to fully benefit from these values. When considering British Muslims, their freedom of expression seems to be considerably restricted, particularly with the introduction of the Prevent Duty (Abbas et al. 2021; Holmwood and Aitlhadj 2022; Miah 2017; Open Society Justice Initiative 2016; Taylor and Soni 2017). Likewise, Muslim teachers were influenced by the ongoing political environment after the Trojan Horse affair, which resulted in a noticeable chilling effect on their professional conduct. Another participant echoed a similar sentiment:

I have obviously liked the Britishness in me as I was brought up and bred in the UK. However, there is a sense of independence that I have liked. Obviously, a lot of other Yemenis would not have. But I think a big thing is education as well. So, because of the fact that someone's education, you feel more empowered, that you have more of a voice and that you are able to travel and work. And that gives us a lot of freedom, especially as a woman, you can go abroad, and you can find a job a well-paid job, and you can be respected in that field. (Laila)

The ethnic heritage of Laila prompted her to juxtapose the conditions in the UK with those of her peers in Yemen. In the above narrative, personal freedoms come to the fore as a dominant feature that defines Britishness. Laila pointed out that the education she received in England as a Muslim woman was crucial in her ability to access these individual freedoms compared to her peers in Yemen. What stands out in Laila's account is the significant role that ethnic, religious, and gender identities play a key role in shaping her perception of Britishness (Crenshaw 2013; McCall 2005). While the following narrative emphasises the impact of different identities and roles on the construction of Britishness, it also discusses Britishness through the value of respecting differences:

I find it difficult to define being British. What is being British? I describe myself as British, but I am ethnically Pakistani; I am Bradfordian, I am a woman, I am a single mom, I am a math teacher, and to some degree, I am pretty academic. I wear so many hats. I have many different identities. So, I cannot say that to be British is to believe in the Queen and Country because, actually, some people are not loyalists. Is it being British to queue in a line at the post office? Is it being British to drink tea with your pinkie? I do not know. In my mind being British is or should be respecting differences. (Sana)

Sana suggests that delineating Britishness is a complex undertaking that requires a nuanced appreciation of the diverse factors that inform national identity (Farrell 2016; Vadhwa and Barrett 2009). In line with this assertion, the influence of various identities and roles on Sana's self-perception is evident. However, Sana questioned the typical portrayal of Britishness based on national symbols and cultural habits, including references to the royal family, tea drinking, and queuing (Commission for Racial Equality 2005). In opposition to Sana's perspective, it is noted in the literature that some teachers tend to associate cultural symbols with Britishness, regarding them as essential components of British identity (Elton-Chalcraft et al. 2017; Struthers 2016). Furthermore, Ofsted has criticised school posters depicting symbols such as the Queen, Shakespeare, and teacups under the umbrella of British values for merely reflecting a superficial representation of

shared values (Vincent 2019). Ultimately, the notion of valuing diversity is outlined in Sana's discourse as a central tenet that serves as the foundation of Britishness.

Likewise, Farhan associated Britishness with the following values: *"Being respectful to others, having mutual respect for the people, having tolerance in the respect that, and following the regulations and the law"*. Unlike the participants above, Farhan also linked civic responsibilities like obeying rules with the concept of Britishness. Siddique also shared a similar tendency, stating, *"I think obeying the rule of law, respecting people of other beliefs, these kinds of things"*. Tariq similarly reflects this sentiment: *"The following procedure is one of the things that I think the Brits do really well: the values that they hold. They follow certain things in certain ways and have discipline and resilience"*. This reflection is intriguing as it attributes highly individual features, like possessing discipline, to the broader collective realm of national identity.

Consequently, the British values outlined by the Department for Education, encompassing principles such as *"democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect, and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs"* (DfE 2012, p. 9) resonates closely with the participants' conceptualisations of Britishness. This signifies the influence of prevailing educational policies and discourses regarding promoting FBVs on the participants' perceptions. This underscores the entailment of contextualising teacher professional identity within historical frameworks (Zembylas and Chubbuck 2018). A nuanced grasp of the dynamic evolution of teacher professional identity necessitates a holistic comprehension of the contemporary political landscape, educational policies, and the essence of teacher professionalism (Zembylas and Chubbuck 2018).

Considering the participants' strong affinity with Britishness as well as their statements that they have internalised the aforementioned values in their lives, suggests that these values play a key role in providing some answer to their existential questions (Giddens 1991). Throughout this article, the findings clearly emphasise that interpreting the participants' existential concerns or professional identity solely through their religious or ethnic affiliations is inadequate; rather, it underscores the necessity of recognition of the active and significant role of their British identity in this contextual exploration. The fear of potentially labelling as 'illiberal' or 'extremist' often suppresses Muslim teachers' professional identities and professional attitudes, leading to complexities and problems in their interactions with professional institutions and individuals, as evidenced in the Trojan Horse affair. Consequently, it results in violating their 'protective cocoon' and weakening their ontological security (Giddens 1991). It is clear that Muslim teachers in this study, in contrast to portrayals in media and political rhetoric, have cultivated a proud and self-aware comprehension of Britishness that harmonises with their religious identity. This cohesive understanding of national identity affords them an ontologically secure environment within educational settings. However, the dubiousness surrounding their Britishness can swiftly destabilise their ontological security, particularly during times of crisis (Croft 2012; Giddens 1991).

4.3. The Interplay of British Values and Teacher Professional Identity

The Teachers' Standards 2012 and the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 introduced a novel dimension to teacher professionalism in Britain: the requirement for teachers to be actively involved in the war on terrorism (Miller 2010). The Teachers' Standards 2012, allegedly drafted with a clear assimilationist philosophy aimed at maintaining the existing status quo (Smith 2013), were formulated without adequate "professional dialogue" (Elton-Chalcraft et al. 2017, p. 30), which then significantly contributed to altering the essence of teacher professional identity (Revell and Bryan 2016). This research has revealed a general categorisation of the impact of promoting FBVs on Muslim teachers' professional identity into two main groups: teachers who normalise FBV policy and discourse and those who adopt a critical perspective towards the policy. The subsequent quote illustrates the degree to which Aisha normalises the role of FBVs in her professional identity:

We have to teach British values PSHE once a week. I do not have a problem with it. To be honest, I do not think the British value values are designed specifically to target Muslims.

I think if there is an idea of what harmonious Britain looks like, in theory, it is good. Then, when it is not doing what it is supposed to be doing, we have means to question it. However, if the values are distorted, or in practical lives when not being able to express any concerns, that is a problem. It is not a problem in theory.

Aisha demonstrates a tendency to implement the policy of promoting FBVs without engaging in critical reflection or consideration. In this context, she relinquished her agency to some extent while interacting with the policy, thereby mitigating any potential impacts that could have influenced her professional identity. This approach may be interpreted as maintaining the principle of ‘professionalism’ without compromising it. This can also be viewed as a kind of enactment strategy, representing an attempt to minimize to some degree the anticipated or unforeseen adverse impact of the policy (Ball et al. 2011). Nevertheless, while the concept of promoting British values may promise societal advancement, at least in theory, Aisha makes it clear that she will exercise her right to object in the case of employing FBVs beyond their intended purpose as it would undermine the proper execution of democratic processes. Yet Aisha challenged the claim that FBVs were aimed at the British Muslim community, despite the substantial evidence indicating that the introduction of FBVs was proposed as a response to the perceived ‘Muslim threat’ (Crawford 2017; Miah 2017; Thomas 2011; Vincent 2018). The next quote also echoes Aisha’s perspective to some extent:

I do not think it (FBVs) hinders anything. I do not think it impacts us, sort of negatively in any way. These come from the central government. Our schools are responsible for suppressing any negative feelings people may have towards the country. I personally do not think that there is anything basically wrong with promoting good values. So, I think we, as teachers, are in the right setting to be able to promote positivity, which they describe as British fundamental British values. But students, when they go through the list of these values, they relate to it, understand it, and know its importance. (Ali)

Herein, it is important to note that Ali provided a critical viewpoint on the Prevent strategy and articulated its adverse impact on his professional identity while exploring the link between the Prevent duty and professional identity for my PhD research (Dilek 2024). Ali’s stance on the Prevent duty presents a paradoxical aspect when considered in conjunction with his approach to FBVs. This dilemma arises from Ali’s emphasis on the pedagogical aspect of teaching ‘good values’ within the FBV policy text, rather than paying attention to the broader policy framework and its associated discourses. One could argue that the emphasis on instilling ‘good values’ has overshadowed several criticisms towards FBV policy, including overlooking the intricate nature of extremism and having a chilling effect on academic debate (Panjwani 2016). Through the promotion of FBVs, a model of the ideal teacher is essentially set out, and through disciplinary processes and surveillance, teachers are expected to conform their conduct to certain norms. Muslim teachers, in turn, strive to avoid deviating from these norms and being labelled as abnormal. It is at this point that these norms prepare the ground for teachers to engage in a process of normalising political discourse and educational policy (Foucault et al. 2007). On the other hand, some participants adopted a critical stance towards the FBVs without any hesitation:

While the Prevent policy explicitly excludes Muslims, fundamental British values implicitly exclude Muslims. British values are to put everybody under one kind of thought, that one thing that they believe in. I do not think it was meant to unite people. It is like, oh, look, you have to be like me. Do you understand it is almost like that? No, I do not have to. I have to respect everybody, of course, but I do not have to be like you. This is calling people to think one way is right. (Mariam)

Mariam holds the perspective that, unlike Aisha’s stance, the FBVs policy indirectly singles out the British Muslim community. Indeed, it has been noted that this policy is an attempt to break down the resistance of young British Muslims in particular to embrace British values (Cameron 2011; Miah 2017; Thomas 2011; Vincent 2018). Mariam has openly addressed the adverse impact of the Prevent duty on both her personal and professional

life and the broader British Muslim community. Mariam argues that the British values policy, founded on the principle of actively advocating for a singular way of life, lacks the capacity to feature the shared values for the diverse British society. In this regard, she contends that this idea does not serve a unifying function but rather exacerbates divisions within society. The underlying philosophy of FBVs is rooted in the idea of muscular liberalism or what [Modood \(2012\)](#) referred to as “a form of liberal perfectionism” (p. 143). This philosophy is characterised by a proactive and assertive defence of secular liberal values and active promotion of these values to individuals who may not adhere to them, which stands in contrast to tolerance-based liberalism ([Gray 2000](#); [Revell and Bryan 2018](#); [Triadafilopoulos 2011](#)). While Mariam did not make the values themselves a subject of discussion, her focus lay on the objectives and consequences of the policy, drawing attention to its impact on the British Muslim community and therefore on her professional identity. The next observation reveals the extent to which participant self-censor their freedom of expression within the school due to the legal obligation to promote the FBVs:

I think it (FBVs) makes me very insular. I think it makes me very, very closed from the teaching world. I think I become very reserved. I spend very little time in the staff room; I do not interact with staff as much; I keep myself to myself. Because I know people ask questions sometimes, it can be awkward. If people do not understand, it makes it very, very difficult for us. (Tariq)

Tariq stated that his reluctance to openly express his opinions during discussions with colleagues, fearing being misunderstood. He noted that this led him to intentionally isolate himself within the school environment. It is important to note that Tariq’s working environment with fewer ethnically diverse teachers and predominantly white students also paved the way for his professional identity to be under constant surveillance. Following the Trojan Horse affair, schools with a substantial Muslim student and teacher population in England were often rendered as distinct from mainstream Britishness ([Martin 2019](#)) whereby the failure of Muslim teachers to uphold the shared values known as British values was frequently emphasised ([Holmwood and O’Toole 2018](#)). To avoid being exposed to such an accusation, Tariq opts to maintain a reserved stance within the school environment, limiting interactions and thereby safeguarding his professionalism from potential suspicion or scrutiny.

The findings of this section identified a degree of uncertainty regarding the participants’ experiences: those who normalised the legal requirement to promote FBVs and those who critically analysed FBVs. The teachers in the first group approached the FBV policy with an uncritical perspective, focusing primarily on the values themselves. They indicated that the interaction between FBVs and their professional identity formation is significantly constrained. However, they expressed concerns that discussing these values could lead to questioning their Britishness, sense of belonging, and professionalism due to their Muslim identity. The emotion of ‘fear’ plays a pivotal role in the professional identity of Muslim teachers in this group. These fears and anxieties erode the trust relationships of Muslim teachers with the professionals and institutions they collaborate with, making it challenging for them to establish their ontological security ([Giddens 1991](#)). By normalising FBVs, Muslim teachers mitigate external threats such as stigmatisation, ostracism, or potential job loss, ensuring that external factors do not jeopardise their protective cocoon and aiming to uphold their ontological security ([Giddens 1991](#)).

Teachers in the second group, on the other hand, depicted how the discourse surrounding FBVs negatively impacts their professional identity formation with a more critical perspective. Teachers in this group highlighted how FBVs hindered constructive academic discussions and suppressed their professional identity. Teachers in the second group appear to be more prominently marked by a sense of ontological insecurity. Their religious identity serves as a foundation for addressing the existential questions that Muslim teachers encounter ([Giddens 1991](#)). However, these teachers are cognisant of the political discourse surrounding their religious identity. In their professional lives, their religious identities are targeted, prompting them to adopt a more reserved approach, intensifying the chilling

effect. This results in teachers suspending typical daily professional routines, such as engaging in discussions with students or participating in debates with colleagues (Giddens 1991). Hence, similar to the teachers in the first group, the relationships of these teachers with professionals and organisations transition from a secure footing to a more problematic terrain (Giddens 1991). British values, which have secured its position in the education system through the Prevent duty, significantly complicate the dynamics of relationships between teachers and their students, as well as between teachers and educational institutions, which is especially evident during the implementation of the Prevent duty (Lewis 2020; Walker 2018). It does this by silencing certain voices in classroom discussions and creating a chilling effect, particularly in the name of promoting British values (Taylor and Soni 2017; Walker 2018). The prevailing political atmosphere renders it difficult for Muslim teachers to cultivate a positive sense of well-being and integrity (Giddens 1991). For these reasons, teachers in the second group appear to be more prominently marked by a sense of ontological insecurity (Giddens 1991; Laing 1990).

5. Conclusions

This research examines a relatively underexplored facet of teacher professional identity: the interplay between politics/policy and professional identity. Specifically, it investigates the influence of British values policy on the professional identities of Muslim teachers. The findings of this research are centred around three interrelated tendencies. Firstly, Muslim teachers identify themselves as British, demonstrating that British and Muslim identities can coexist harmoniously. They frequently emphasised their pride in being British and stated that they had successfully integrated into the country. Although the participants were not queried about their self-identification as British, they felt the need to articulate such statements. At this point, it should be noted that this emphasis on Britishness is closely intertwined with the notion of professionalism. A commitment to national identity that is not manifested at a minimum level in a public setting may inherently prompt scrutiny regarding their professionalism, given the surveillance of teacher professional standards. Put differently, Britishness represents a pivotal criterion essential for optimal professional performance, particularly for those who are perceived to lack it. Secondly, the interpretation that participants assigned to Britishness was shaped by the British values delineated in the existing teacher's professional standards, elucidating Britishness through values which have universal characteristics. This demonstrates the key role of current teacher standards in the construction of professional identity, but also professional identity needs to be considered in its historical context.

Finally, the obligation to promote FBVs has engendered a degree of ambivalence in the professional identity formation of Muslim teachers, rooted in their quest for ontological security. While some of the participants tended to normalise the discussions concerning FBVs, others adopted a critical stance, noting the degree to which FBVs adversely impacted their professional identities. The underlying reason for the inclination towards normalisation is that the first group of teachers did not delve into the policy itself and the discourses shaping the policy; rather, they conducted the debate by means of 'values'. Any discussion of values would have implied that Muslim teachers' professionalism could easily have been subject to scrutiny. To avoid this potential issue, they refrained from engaging in discussions regarding values or the policy itself, instead stating their adherence to professional conduct in their practice. The second group, on the contrary, approached the debate by scrutinising the policy itself, illustrating how the policy specifically targeted their religious identities and generated a chilling effect within the classroom. The extent to which professional identity has been falsified by the enactment of the FBV policy has become even more evident within this group.

Regarding the theory of ontological security, just as Britishness is a source of ontological security that provides answers to existential questions for the majority within the society/profession, Muslim teachers also see Britishness and want Britishness to be seen as a source of solutions to existential questions rather than an entity that layers existen-

tial problems in their pursuit of ontological security. However, Muslim teachers need to continuously declare their proud embrace of this collective identity to exist within an ontologically secure sphere, thereby endeavouring to construct a national identity that is not doubted and unquestioned. In this way, the groundwork establishes the necessary conditions for attaining absolute professionalism demanded within the educational context. The findings revealed that the sentiment of ‘fear’ is a dominant emotion in the formation of Muslim teachers’ professional identity rather than a sense of trust, which typically underpins ontological security. This fear manifests in various forms, such as the fear of being labelled as illiberal, sometimes as the fear of being unprofessional, ultimately this fear implicitly implies the potential job loss.

Furthermore, this fear prevents the proper functioning of certain professional routines, such as conducting an academic discussion within the school. These discussions target another collective sphere, that is their religious identities where Muslim teachers find answers to their existential problems. This climate of fear ultimately undermines Muslim teachers’ trust in institutions, colleagues, and school leaders, while simultaneously eroding the trust placed in Muslim teachers. In conclusion, the construction of professional identities of Muslim teachers under the current teachers’ standards is inextricably linked with British identity and values, that is the performing of professionalism requires the constant demonstration of Britishness and the embodiment of British values by teachers from the suspect community. This dynamic engenders a climate of fear, thereby discouraging any potential criticism of the policy in the public sphere. Furthermore, the debates surrounding FBVs place Muslim teachers in this study in a fragile position, with the majority experiencing ontological insecurity, while others remain in a state of neither ontological security nor insecurity.

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