
Ron Geaves

EDITORIAL

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Welcome to this special edition of *Fieldwork in Religion* dedicated to Muslims and Islam in the West. Before continuing to address the significance of empirical studies of Muslims in Britain to advances in the study of religion, I would like to inform our readers and contributors that *FIR* has recently been evaluated for inclusion in Scopus by the Content Selection & Advisory Board (CSAB). The Board's comments are worth noting:

There is much about this journal to like and very little to dislike. It fills an important niche in anthropology, sociology and religious studies, is very widely-cited, and publishes mostly very high-quality articles (along with the occasional turkey, but that is true of almost every journal). It was a pleasure to review these pieces. Welcome to Scopus!

Clearly from the comment above, the review of *FIR* is completed and the CSAB has advised that we are *accepted* for inclusion in Scopus. Obviously we will have to make sure that the “turkeys” are eliminated but it is good to know that they are only occasional. This is great news and good to get such positive feedback on the journal after its first decade of existence.

I decided to guest edit this issue after receiving a number of high quality contributions whose subject matter was Muslims in the West, or more usually in Britain, with occasional articles dealing with contemporary issues in Muslim majority

nations but of pertinence to Muslims in Britain. Although these articles were not a result of a conference or a special call for papers for a themed edition of the journal, but came in via the normal channels of submission, I realized that there were sufficient articles that had passed through the peer review to form a themed edition on the topic of Muslims in Britain or the West. The numbers of articles coming to *FIR* on these topics may reflect my long-term interest in researching Islam and Muslims in Britain and my many contacts among the increasing numbers of scholars researching in this area. However, this is only part of the story and the least significant in my view.

Of far greater significance is the contribution of scholars of contemporary Islam, especially those studying Muslim presences in Western Europe or North America, to the development of a truly interdisciplinary approach and the creative methodologies for fieldwork amidst religious communities that arise from young scholars coming out of so many disciplines. This is evidenced by the number of such articles that have appeared in *FIR*, going back to the very first issue when Sophie Gilliat-Ray offered her ground-breaking article on failing to access the field. The second area of significance is the challenge offered to emic/etic discourses in the study of religion and anthropology/sociology. When the Muslims in Britain Research Network was founded by Professor Jørgen Nielsen in Birmingham in the mid-1980s, it consisted of a handful of scholars, the majority of whom were white, male and non-Muslim. Sociology dominated with a few of us coming from the study of religion. Today the picture is very different: there are over 250 scholars involved in the Network, both senior academics and young scholars, either working on their doctoral theses or beginning postdoctoral careers. The vast majority are Muslim fieldworkers applying the microscope of social science methodology or creating their own innovative field designs on their own communities. This has resulted in an extraordinary degree of creative thinking concerning the emic/etic borders or non-borders. The gender balance has also shifted with many more Muslim women engaged in academic field studies that focus on some aspect of lived religious life in Britain.

The following issue of *FIR* presents a number of such studies. In the opening article, "Review of the Contemporary Literature on Islam and Muslims in the UK through the Lens of Immigration Issues, Civic Participation and International Constraints," I have taken the licence to present an article that offers an overview of how the study of Muslims in Britain has been transformed over the last three decades. It cannot include all the contributions that would now form an annotated bibliography and I have limited the scope, thus I apologise in advance that significant contributions have been left out of the review. However, I hope that this wider picture of the changing nature of the field will provide some insights

into the process described in the preceding paragraph. In most cases, the contributions that follow offer insights into the challenges of researching inside a religious community to which one belongs, but other contributions pose the opposite problem, namely, researching communities that might be hard to access as an outsider, or where suspicion of motives becomes an issue.

Imran Awan and Sara Correia provide insights from within the Muslim communities in Cardiff in their joint article “Engaging with the Muslim Community in Cardiff: A Study of the Impact of Counter-Terrorism Research.” Imran Awan is Senior Lecturer at the Centre for Applied Criminology, Birmingham City University, UK, and Sara Correia is a PhD Candidate at the College of Law and Criminology, Swansea University, Wales, UK. In an environment in which, since the 9/11 attacks in 2001, there have been a number of terrorist suspects arrested in the UK, many of whom are released without charge, the Muslim communities in Britain not only feel that some aspects of counter-terrorism legislation is heavy handed and counter-productive but that it has led to overkill in research projects, that could in itself be deemed intrusive. This article presents findings from a pilot research project that examined how best to engage with Muslim communities and to examine perceptions from these communities with regards to counter-terrorism legislation. The project hoped to address issues such as how to gain access to participants; how to obtain informed consent for participation in the research; identifying appropriate methods of data collection; appropriate venues for the fieldwork; identifying ethical concerns arising from the research; and identifying any risks to participants and researchers arising from the research, as well as the strategies needed to overcome these risks. The study offers a blueprint for further research into the impact of counter-terrorism legislation on Muslim communities in Cardiff.

Ali Omar also provides an article based on fieldwork in Cardiff. Entitled “From Imam to Researcher: A Critical Reflection on Researching Muslim Chaplains in the UK” his contribution, prompted by fieldwork undertaken on the “Muslim Chaplaincy in Britain” project between September 2008 and August 2009 and located in the Centre for the Study of Islam in Britain, Cardiff University, continues the theme and evaluates key challenges and sensitivities encountered during the fieldwork. The points for discussion include issues of positionality, insider/outsider, access and interviewing “the other.” In particular the article discusses the significance of the researcher’s biography—himself a Muslim Chaplain and Imam—and how these have impacted on the collection and production of data. In this article the author uses the argument that “shared religious identity” can and does affect the research process.

Tom Wilson is also a religious professional, an Anglican priest, thus his experiences of insider/outsider dynamics in the field offer different insights to Omar but no less instructive. Drawing upon his successfully completed PhD thesis undertaken in an Anglican primary school with a majority of Muslim students, this article entitled “Researching Lived Islam as an Evangelical Anglican Minister: How Truthful, how Forthright and how Static Should I be?” reflects upon the author’s faith position as an evangelical Anglican minister. The article argues that researchers must be honest about their own views if they expect those they are working with to be honest about theirs. Examples from his fieldwork, including discussion of belief about Christmas and Easter and experience of fasting during Ramadan, are used to illustrate the points under discussion. The article argues that while researchers must be truthful, there are times when they should not be forthright about their own beliefs. The article also discusses the author’s experience of personal change during his fieldwork, explaining how his beliefs about Islam and practise of Christianity were altered as a result of his fieldwork.

The next article moves our field locations to North America. John Cappucci of Windsor University, Ontario, in an article entitled “The Surreptitious Scholar: The Challenges of Conducting Interviews with Iraqi-Shi’a Muslim Participants in Dearborn, Michigan,” highlights the challenges presented by Imran Awan and Sara Correia. Cappucci found that conducting research with these groups proved difficult as it was believed that the researcher was either a “journalist” working for a major media outlet or, more severely, a “spy” working for a government agency and posing as a scholar. The level of suspicion initially exuded by the community proved to be a significant obstruction to this research project. In order to help dissolve the sense of suspicion that permeated the atmosphere, the researcher undertook a few unique strategies to ensure his identity and ease the fears held by the participant community. These strategies are informative and present a different set of challenges to those posed by Omar and Wilson, who as clerics, albeit in different faith communities, arguably held positions of privilege among their research cohorts.

In the final submission by Mashal Saif, who lectures in philosophy and religion at Clemson University in the USA, entitled “Beyond Text: Fluid *Fatwas* and Embodied *Muftis*”, we have moved field location to the Muslim majority nation of Pakistan. My original editorial decision was to include this article in a later edition of *FIR* as it did not carry out research in a Western minority Muslim community. However, I reconsidered as the content of the article was informative of current practices in a Muslim *dar al-ulum* (seminary) and shows how the *ulema* (Islamic clerical scholars) negotiate the process of issuing *fatwa*. As these processes are little understood, contentious and similar in the British context where Pakistani

influences remain significant, I felt that the article was instructive in the minority context, at least in Britain. The author argues that the studies of Islamic juridical pronouncements (*fatwa*) are characterized by a text-centric approach in which the text of the *fatwa* is seen as standing in a virtually sanitized environment free from the complexities of form, process, context and language. Challenging this bias in scholarship on *fatwa*, he argues for a broadening of the traditional text-centred approach to *fatwa* analysis by highlighting the importance of examining the *fatwa* issuance process as well as the broader context of *fatwa* that is jointly constructed and negotiated during the *fatwa* issuance process by the juriconsult (*mufti*) and the questioner (*mustafti*). He substantiates his arguments by drawing on theories of language, interview methodology and writings on context and embodiment. Most pertinently from the perspective of *FIR* he elucidates the significance of his propositions and recommendations, with examples from the field, including his own ethnographic work.