

## Interview: Tariq Modood – On being a public intellectual, a Muslim and a multiculturalist

In an interview for *Renewal* with Simon Thompson, **Tariq Modood**, one of Britain's foremost Muslim public intellectuals, discusses the role of the public intellectual, Islam and British public life, and a critically evolving multiculturalism. You can read the full interview for free, online [here](#). In this extract Modood discusses the impact of the Salman Rushdie affair of 1989 on his politics.



### Do you see yourself as bringing a specifically Muslim voice to public debate?

To answer this we need to go back to the Rushdie affair. The Rushdie affair was a pivotal intellectual and biographical moment for me, because in some ways I came to *be* a Muslim at that time. It would have been quite straightforward for me to walk away from all these angry, aggressive Muslims and simply say: *they have nothing to do with me*. But I thought instead: *these people are something to do with me*. I was working in racial equality and community relations, I had a sense of belonging, solidarity, with a community of suffering. I was aware of and proud of my Pakistani roots. I thought of myself as British Asian, so to extend that to think of myself as a British Asian Muslim didn't seem such a leap. But it wasn't obvious either. I knew other British Asians who didn't want to have anything to do with these 'fundamentalists'. I felt I needed to address Muslims as much as I needed to address the wider public, and I needed to address them in a way that both exhibited identification and solidarity with them and said: *this is where I stand and this is where we should stand – and we should distinguish ourselves from some other Muslim positions*. So it was a critical stance, but I was expressing it as a Muslim.

### Did you see your role in the Rushdie debate as standing up for the marginalised; as standing up for British Muslims?

At that time, there were at least *two* prominent things motivating me. Concern for the wellbeing of British society. *And* concern for the wellbeing of British Muslims as a particular part of British society. I was trying to follow these two deep personal commitments *equally*. It wasn't just Muslims and Salman Rushdie who were affected. British society was affected by this incident – and, in fact, this set of issues is not confined to one country. ^

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Some people might say about me: ‘he doesn’t care about Britain, he just wants to look after the Muslim constituency’. I personally have never thought along those lines. I have an abiding concern for the wellbeing of British society, which doesn’t mean that British society sometimes doesn’t misunderstand where its wellbeing lies. When I try and engage with a broader British public, I am trying to get people to think about what is *really* good for British society. What is consistent with its beliefs and long-term character? Because, of course, British society has to work and adapt to include in a fair and just way what we might call the new British. What I have been concerned about – in the Rushdie affair and after – has not been the wellbeing of Muslims *per se*, but the wellbeing of Muslims who are part of British society and whose future is part of British society. The wellbeing of these parties is entangled, and the conflictual parts of the entanglement have to be worked out so that the wellbeing of each becomes interdependent and, if you like, integrated.

### Does sharing an identity mean sharing solidarity?

My biography gives me insights and a sensibility that others don’t have. I don’t claim to be specially empathetic, but I can say that I know certain things, having been brought up as a Muslim, having been an Asian in Britain since I was a child, and going to a very white, working-class school with a lot of racist and other kinds of bullying. I think this was the basis for my career. I could see that the way that British society was beginning to politically conceptualize the issues around race in the 1970s and 80s just did not fit with my own sense of who I was. And I felt that I was actually the norm in Asian communities and not the exception, for example, like most British Asians I did not think I was black, nor, of course, white; and nor did I define myself against Britishness but as making a new, distinctive claim on it. That gave me the basis for arguing against a kind of black-white racial dualism and towards ethnic pluralism – towards multicultural Britishness, where there are different ways of being British. I don’t think of myself as *simply* speaking as a Muslim. When I speak, I speak as a *multiculturalist* above all. This is the intellectual commitment that I bring to public debate.

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The emergence of religion as a live issue, in particular the assertion of Muslim identity, was actually a bit of a surprise to me. When I first heard about the Rushdie affair I thought, ‘it’s not right for Muslims to be getting so angry’. But *being* amongst Muslims made me realise that this really mattered to some Muslims, and they were unable to do what their sympathisers were asking them to do – which was basically to just forget about the novel entirely. I could see that some Muslims were headed for a confrontation, and this wasn’t good for these Muslims or for British society. And because I could identify with them I could understand: not because I’m particularly empathetic, as I say, but because I belong to a certain social world.

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### Do you think that racism, and in particular Islamophobia, are growing problems in this country, and what can politics do to fight against this rise?

Most of the evidence suggests that racial discrimination, say in relation to jobs, persists. Ethnic minorities continue to make progress in terms of socio-economic mobility and participation in public life, but that’s mainly because of the extra qualifications they achieve rather than *because*

there is a level playing field. On the other hand, I think that racial prejudice is in relative decline if we look at the views of younger people compared to older people, and at friendship, dating, relationships, marriage and so on. Yet both in terms of employment and social life, suspicion of and hostility to Muslims continues to rise. Partly this is collective blame for jihadi terrorism but it's also an antipathy to publicly asserted religious identities.

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This ‘Muslim penalty’ has to be much more publicly stated as a problem. Blanket condemnation of racism is not enough. We need positive national narratives which feature Muslims and Islam as aspects of what it is to be British. Politicians also need to work with Muslim communities to identify, isolate and defeat the processes leading to terrorism, rather than speak as if Muslims were the problem or that terrorism is a problem the Muslim community could solve on its own – or indeed that it could be solved without the full engagement of the Muslim communities, including conservative Muslims and critics of government foreign policies.

### About the authors



**Tariq Modood** is the founding Director of the Bristol University Research Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship.

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You can read the full interview for free, online [here](#).

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