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# “I Feel as Though I’m Doing the Job of the Imam for Them”: Considering ‘Tactical’ Muslim Leadership Through the Case of ‘Muslim RE Teachers’

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**Abstract:** Although Muslim leadership in Britain has long been the focus of scholarly attention, discussion has tended to prioritise “official” Muslim leaders (Birt 2006; Geaves 2008; Ahmad and Evergeti 2010). However, what constitutes a “Muslim leader” is increasingly contested, revealing instead a diversity of authoritative ‘claim makers’ and representative positions (Jones et al. 2015). These contestations were a recurring theme throughout the *Leadership, Authority and Representation in British Muslim Communities* conference (Gilliat-Ray and Timol 2019). Building upon these debates, this article considers how Muslim teachers can be considered Muslim leaders within their local contexts. This paper draws on qualitative research with 21 ‘Muslim RE teachers’ across England to consider how their experience and positioning as ‘role models’ for Muslim and non-Muslim pupils brought considerable influence to represent Muslims, affect school policy and practice, and shape “official” Islamic discourses in their local communities. I argue that their experience reflects what can be considered as ‘Muslim leadership’ on the broader scholarly terrain, but as a form of ‘tactical’ Muslim leadership by virtue of existing within the confines of “secular” institutions. As such, this article concludes by calling for the recognition of Muslim leadership beyond national, ‘strategic’ forms to more ‘tactical’, contextually bounded cases.

**Keywords:** Muslim leadership; Muslim teachers; Muslims in Britain; education; religious education; RE teachers; tactical religion; strategic religion

## 1. Introduction

Although Muslim leadership in Britain has long been the focus of scholarly attention, discussion has tended to prioritise “official” forms and sites of leadership, such as the imam and Muslim umbrella bodies (Birt 2006; Geaves 2008; Ahmad and Evergeti 2010). However, critics have argued that the concept of a ‘Muslim leader’ is problematic. The notion evokes the sense of a monolithic Muslim community that in turn fails to reflect the diversity of voices and conflicting positions within Muslim communities (Jones et al. 2015). An emphasis on religious authority, authenticity, and praxis, also presents a narrow view of leadership (Gilliat-Ray 2010, p. 54). These contestations emerged as a recurring theme throughout the *Leadership, Authority and Representation in British Muslim Communities* conference (Gilliat-Ray and Timol 2019), which asked, who exactly are Muslim leaders in Britain today?

In the wake of these contestations, new and alternative forms of Muslim leadership are being articulated. Jones et al. (2015, p. 213) argue for the recognition of a diversity of Muslim ‘claim-makers’ that utilise different modes of representation for different groups and individuals. Gilliat-Ray et al. (2013) posit that Muslim chaplaincy has led to the development of a new form of professional leadership, in their capacity to shape Islam to secular policy frameworks of British public institutions. Discussions of Muslim leadership in relation to education has restated the importance of Islamic

scholars: *alims* and *alimahs*, and *Dar Ul Uloom*s, as contemporary sources and sites of authority (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015; Sidat 2018). Moreover, as Bano (2017) writes, education has been a particularly important sphere for female Muslim leadership.

The presence of Muslim ‘role models’ has been side-lined in these debates, neglecting its potential as a form of Muslim leadership and representation in contemporary Britain. Burdsey (2007, 2016) has highlighted, and problematised, the importance of sports personalities like Amir Khan and Mo Farah within discourses surrounding multi-ethnic and post-racial Britain both as ‘role models’ and ‘palatable representations’ of the ‘British Muslim’, primarily for non-Muslim Brits. Similarly, Nadiya Hussain, of *Great British Bake Off* fame, has become a symbol of both (Muslim) female agency and postcolonial assimilation (Casey 2018; Lagerwey 2018), to such an extent that Ted Cante has remarked that Nadiya has done ‘more for British-Muslim relations than 10 years of government policy’ (Wiseman 2018). But, again, these notions of role modelling have been criticised because of their orientation toward a white, British audience.

Yet, the promotion of Muslim role models seems to be occurring from within Muslim communities. Jones et al. (2015, pp. 218–19) highlight ‘standing’ as a type of ‘surrogate’ representative position: ‘how public prominence can enable an individual to speak out on topics that have relatively little to do with the reason why that person is in the public spotlight’. They discuss how Muslim MPs, like Sajid Javid and Sadiq Khan, as well as Amir Khan, have used their prominence, power, and Muslim identity to ‘speak for’ Muslims, even though this may go beyond their expertise—both politically and ‘religiously’. Like Nadiya Hussain, this kind of leadership seems to be especially important for Muslim women, with individuals challenging prevailing discourses within and outside Muslim communities. Elsewhere, Khan (2018) photography counters stereotypical ‘misrepresentations’ of Muslim women in the media by drawing attention to their engagement in a wide variety of activities and fields. The *Women Like Us* series by British Muslim TV (Choudhry 2018) also champions this narrative, featuring interviews with Muslim women who are leading within a diverse array of fields whilst also emphasising their identities as Muslims. However, whilst role models exhibit the potential for leadership and representation for Muslims, their capacity to act as “Muslim leaders” remains largely unexplored.

It struck me during my doctoral research how ‘Muslim RE teachers’ occupied many of these representative positions. On a micro level, specific to their community and school contexts, these teachers were often positioned as ‘role models’ and ‘community leaders’ by Muslim and non-Muslim pupils, parents, and staff. This article therefore re-considers Muslim leadership through the case of Muslims working as non-confessional Religious Education (RE) teachers across secondary schools in England, or ‘Muslim RE teachers’. Drawing on qualitative research with 21 participants, I consider how their experience as role models for Muslim and non-Muslims brought considerable influence to represent Muslims, affect school policy and practice, and engage with “official” Islamic discourses in their local communities. I argue that they reflect what is considered as ‘Muslim leadership’ in the broader scholarly terrain, but that their leadership is more subtle and ‘hidden’ by virtue of existing primarily within the confines of a local “secular” institution. Doing so reveals a new kind of ‘tactical’, interlocutory Muslim leadership that complements and contrasts with the national, ‘strategic’ forms of leadership that have already been articulated. This article concludes by calling for the renewed recognition of leadership below the ‘strategic’ level to more contextually bounded, ‘tactical’ cases.

## 2. Representative Positions and Muslim Leadership

Given the increasing diversity of what can be considered ‘Muslim leadership’ the concept itself is nebulous and hard to define. Recognising this multiplicity, Jones et al. (2015, p. 214) provide a way to conceptualise Muslim leadership in terms of *representational positions*. They write that

According to Saward . . . accepting the fact that the British Muslim population is diverse and divided does not mean jettisoning the idea of Muslim representation entirely, as the critics mentioned above appear to believe it does. Representation can be taken on a claim-by-claim

basis. Groups can speak for Muslims—or Muslim women, Muslim converts and so on—on some issues and not on others, at sometimes and not others.

This *claims-focused* approach is useful because it allows ‘Muslim leadership’ to be considered as something that is complex, contested and reflects a constellation of voices (Jones et al. 2015, p. 220). Muslim actors can be leaders in different ways, for different groups, based on varying claims to represent and lead, made by either themselves or by others. Although their analysis is focused on Muslim leadership within proximity to governance, such as the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), they recognise that such claims are also made by those in other arenas, such as at the local level (Jones et al. 2015, p. 215). Therefore, the typology of *representative positions* that Jones et al. (2015) provide offers a useful theoretical foundation from which to explore the capacity for ‘Muslim RE teachers’ to be considered as leaders. In turn, the case of ‘Muslim RE teachers’ serves to support further research and development of this typology.

Their typology of *representative positions* consists of four modes of representation. These are:

- *Delegation*: ‘the building up of ‘grass roots’ support from community institutions or voluntary associations and using that to try and establish credibility and ultimately influence policy’ (Jones et al. 2015, p. 215).
- *Authority*: meaning ‘religious authority, and the role that religious authority can play in allowing individuals a public voice and access to government’ (Jones et al. 2015, p. 216).
- *Expertise*: ‘expertise in a given field—such as discrimination law—has given Muslim individuals the opportunity to enter governance spaces in which they can then speak for the interests of an identity group’ (Jones et al. 2015, p. 217).
- *Standing*: ‘how public prominence can enable an individual to speak out on topics that have relatively little to do with the reason why that person is in the public spotlight’ (Jones et al. 2015, p. 218).

Whilst this typology is limited to forms of representation that exist in proximity to governance, Jones et al. (2015) leave open the possibility for their expansion. Accordingly, through this article I argue that these characteristics map onto more micro-level forms of ‘Muslim leadership’, namely the roles and work that ‘Muslim RE teachers’ engage in in their schools. Throughout their work they occupy these various modes of representation within their school contexts, and act as leaders for the Muslims (typically pupils and parents) in their school communities. In turn, I propose that *role modelling* may be added to this typology as a type of representative position; akin to *standing*.

I also argue for a distinction between ‘tactical’ and ‘strategic’ forms of leadership, to further nuance the above analytical approach. As Woodhead (2016, p. 15) writes, where strategic modes ‘impose’ from above using their institutional authority and power, tactical modes work from within and in response to power;

This does not mean that they are powerless, but that their power operates in a different mode from that of the powerful—a tactical rather than strategic mode. They duck and dive, think on their feet, turn and weave. A tactic, according to de Certeau (1984), ‘is determined by the absence of power just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power’. But contrary to a narrow Foucault-inspired position, the tactical does not merely practice arts of ‘resistance’: it can be highly creative and constructive in what it does with the structures and strategies in terms of which it operates: ‘sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways of “making do”’.

In the discussion, the use of ‘tactical’ leadership reflects the participants occupying representative positions from within and between the policy frameworks and practices of their school contexts and traditional sources of authority within their local Muslim communities. I claim that this is distinct from ‘strategic’ modes of Muslim leadership and representation, explored by Jones et al. (2015), that exist in proximity to national governance and seek change from above.

### 3. The Research

Considering the growth of Muslim actors in education surrounding Preventing Violent Extremism policies and the promotion of Fundamental British Values, Muslim teachers remain surprisingly under-researched. Given their unique positioning as interlocutors between the state and Muslims in schools, and tasked with embodying both, their experiences and perspectives are valuable to exploring how Muslims manage their identities in schools. 'Muslim RE teachers' are a particularly pertinent case because their role as teachers of non-confessional RE means that much of their work explicitly deals with matters of religion within school, more so than in other subjects. As [Freathy et al. \(2016\)](#) state, notions of RE teacher professionalism include unique ontological and epistemological expectations to manage one's own faith and appear 'neutral' in the classroom (see also [Jackson and Everington 2017](#)). Therefore, the experiences of 'Muslim RE teachers' can bring to light processes of identity-work that remain more implicit for Muslim teachers more generally.

Conducted from 2015 to 2018, my research explored the personal and professional identities of 'Muslim RE teachers' through a total sample of 21 teachers working in secondary schools across England. The study employed a qualitative methodology and research design in order to elicit 'thick descriptions' from the participants about their faith and professional identities ([Flick 2009](#)). Although this research is not intended to be representative, and currently no information regarding the religious identification of RE teachers in England is available, the sample is the largest qualitative study involving Muslim RE teachers to date.

#### 3.1. Methods

The research used two data collection methods.

##### 3.1.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 21 one-to-one, semi-structured interviews formed the primary data collection tool—one with each participant. The interviews were designed to explore the ways participants understood their identities as 'Muslims' and as 'RE teachers', and how these two identity-attributes came together in their everyday work. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face in the participants' schools, a smaller number were conducted in other sites, over Skype and by telephone. All the interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and were transcribed verbatim.

##### 3.1.2. Participant Shadowing

The interview data was enriched by three periods of participant shadowing. Shadowing is 'observation on the move', with the researcher following a participant whilst they work ([Czarniawska 2014](#), p. 43). Shadowing was used to supplement the interview data because, as [Gilliat-Ray \(2011\)](#) writes, 'being there' allows the researcher to 'share the experiences' with participants to elicit data of a qualitatively different kind. The concept of shadowing another's work is also part of teaching culture, with teaching observations a common practice in teacher training and development. Here, shadowing was used to supplement the interview data by allowing me to experience how the participants' identities played out moment-by-moment in their schools.

Three participants were shadowed over a period of ten weeks during the Spring and Summer terms of 2017. I spent two or three days a week with each participant, totalling 24 days of observation overall. My observations and reflections were recorded in a fieldwork journal, which were also transcribed along with the interviews. These participants were selected from the wider sample based on their willingness to participate further, and their identification as a significant case on the basis of the interview data.

A 'lived religion' approach was adopted that allowed for analysis to consider the participants' faith and professional identities together. 'Lived religion' considers how the narratives and practices of everyday experience shape the construction of identity ([Ammerman 2016](#)). Within this approach,

religion is 'constituted by the practices people use to remember, share, enact, adapt, create and combine the stories out of which they live', rather than by "official" religious discourses (McGuire 2008, p. 98). As such, 'lived religion' has been fruitful in de-centring foci on "official" forms and sites of religion to religion 'at the edges' (Bender et al. 2013). Similarly, 'Everyday lived Islam' has also drawn attention to scholarship's preoccupation with "official", often hypervisible, forms of 'Muslimness' (Dessing et al. 2016; Werbner 2018). Hence, the use of this framework helped my analysis to look beyond "official" discourses and practices, which is pertinent to the present discussion.

### 3.2. Sample

Biographical data of the sample are worth noting as this is an indication of the diversity of Muslim identities amongst the participants. Participants were selected based on: their self-identification as 'Muslim', holding Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), and were working as, or had worked as, an RE teacher in a secondary school, as identified by job title, job description, or that RE was one of the principal subjects that they taught. The sample consists of 14 self-identified Sunni Muslims, 2 Shia Muslims, 2 Sufi Muslims, 1 Ahmedi Muslim, and 2 who described themselves as 'cultural' and 'political' Muslims. The sample was also mainly of Asian ethnicity (n = 20), and there was one white male Muslim convert. Thus, under the category 'Muslim' diverse intersections of race and denominational identifications feature within the participants' narratives, along with their varied professional understandings of 'RE teaching'.

Participants taught in a variety of secondary academies and Local Education Authority (LEA)-controlled secondary schools across England, located in the North West, Midlands, South East and South West. None of the schools were Muslim faith schools, and a minority (n = 4) were Christian-ethos schools. There was a tendency for these schools to have ethnically diverse student bodies; a tendency that has been noted elsewhere in terms Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) teachers (Cunningham and Hargreaves 2007), but the majority of these could not be said to be Muslim majority. Amongst these there was only one all-girls school. Thus, no generalisations can be made from the data based on the schools of the participants, other than the ethnic diversity of the area, which emphasised themes of race, racism and representation.

The gender of the participants also turned out to be significant in terms of intersecting identity-attributes. They were predominantly female (n = 15), reflecting the higher proportion of women in secondary teaching generally (Department for Education DfE), although this seems to be overrepresentative with regards to ethnicity (Department for Education DfE). This gendered dynamic was not intended and emerged naturally through the sampling procedure. In this way, the data primarily reflects the experiences of Muslim women in teaching, which can be linked to themes of hypervisibility (Jeldtoft 2016), especially surrounding wearing visible Muslim dress in school: with ten of the 15 female participants wearing the hijab in work (no teachers wore the niqab). Also gendered interpersonal relations, particularly with other Muslims in their school communities, were highlighted. The analysis of the data therefore reflected this gendered aspect, emphasising the embodied dimension of teaching in the underlying theoretical framework (see Estola and Elbaz-Luwisch 2003). In the present discussion, the focus on leadership includes specific consideration of the capacity of female Muslim leadership also.

### 3.3. Ethics, Positionality and Presentation of Data

The research was ethically approved by Cardiff University's School of Social Sciences Ethics Committee and designed according to the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (British Educational Research Association BERA).

Being a white, male, non-Muslim researcher 'outside' of the community presented certain challenges to the research. Bolognani (2007, p. 282) has documented a 'general sense of mistrust' toward researchers investigating Muslim communities, especially those perceived to be 'outsiders', which can present barriers to access (see also Gilliat-Ray 2005). Issues with misrepresentation have also

been noted as a common criticism of such research, especially where the researcher may not be sensitive to differences in ethnic, cultural or religious positions (Spalek 2005). My experience of RE teaching (two years) was a point of commonality with the participants, and in a way provided an ‘insider’ perspective on aspects of their experience, which significantly helped with recruitment and access. Within this research I have tried to remain attentive to the limitations of my perspective by giving significant space for the participants’ own voices, here in the form of extended quotations. Although this is no guarantee to capture the ‘secret knowledges’ of marginalised groups (Spalek 2005, p. 414), this idea of ‘giving voice’ has been widely used in feminist research (McDowell 2016). Additionally, all names and places have been changed to protect anonymity, but continue to reflect the participants’ denominational identification, gender and ethnicity (Guenther 2009).

#### 4. Results

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) teacher research has drawn attention to the leadership potential of BME teachers (Haque and Elliot 2017; McNamara et al. 2009; Osler 1997, 2003). Notably, their positioning as role models has been long been highlighted as a significant characteristic of BME leadership in education (Carrington and Skelton 2003; Haque and Elliot 2017; McNamara et al. 2009; Pole 1999). Other roles to support the needs of BME pupils, such as acting as translators for BME pupil communities, have also been identified as roles that are earmarked for BME teachers (Coleman and Campbell-Stephens 2010; Ghuman 1995; Haque and Elliot 2017). Recently, Shah (2016, 2018) has argued for the inclusion of Islamic notions of education and leadership into British state educational leadership to better attend to the needs of Muslim pupils. Thus, notions of leadership already surround Muslim teachers, but primarily as a case of BME actor.

Although not a specific line of inquiry, leadership was a consistent theme that underlined many of the participants’ narratives, echoing this wider literature. In addition to their teaching, notions of leadership were tentatively associated with other roles and responsibilities that they had adopted during their careers. These other roles ranged from more implicit forms of leadership: acting as *ambassadors* and “*Muslim*” *role models*, to more explicit modes of representation: as *Muslim representatives* and *religious authorities*.

##### 4.1. Ambassadors

The participants primarily spoke of their capacity as leaders in terms of being *ambassadors* and *role models*. All the participants in this study saw themselves as role models. Their role modelling centred on the impact of their Muslim identity in the classroom, often in conjunction with their visible ‘Muslimness’, reflecting an intersection between their faith, race, and their professional identity. There were two distinct facets to role modelling: role modelling for non-Muslims in an ambassadorial capacity, and role modelling for Muslims in a more typical role modelling sense.

The main way these teachers spoke of being a role model was in their capacity to “break stereotypes” about Muslims for non-Muslim pupils. Given the nature of RE, it was felt that their work—involving explicit discussion of religion and religious believers in the world today—put them in a privileged position to shape what others thought about Muslims and Islam. This kind of role modelling reflects an *ambassadorial* mode. They occupied a representational position through the authority bestowed on them as teachers over non-Muslim pupils. As Miss Meer reflected

I guess, in a classroom, they can’t walk away from you. You know, they’re in front of you whether they like it or not, and you have enough time to win them round, in a way. (Interview 17, 12:24–17:53)

This commitment to “breaking stereotypes” became an integral part of many of the participants’ pedagogy. Often this was through sharing their ‘personal life knowledge’ as Muslims in discussions in the classroom (see Everington 2012). By sharing their own experiences of being Muslim, and correcting common misconceptions that non-Muslim pupils had, they worked to challenge the frequently racist,

Islamophobic perceptions of these students. Another feature was that they broke stereotypes by simply being visibly Muslim in school. As a hijab-wearing Asian Muslim woman teaching RE, Miss Meer added that

I think it's important for people to see that there are individuals out there that want to be nice, that are decent . . . But they're also Muslim, because it's this idea of Muslims are the bad people. And I wanted to be, sort of, the walking, talking evidence against that. (Interview 17, 12:24–17:53)

Thus, as 'Muslim RE teachers', they acted in an ambassadorial role for non-Muslim pupils as part of their embodied experience of RE teaching. In doing so, the participants occupied a representative position by acting as an example for non-Muslim pupils about what Muslims are really like.

"Breaking stereotypes" extended beyond the classroom, toward challenging the anti-Muslim sentiment of staff and parents. Often the participants were among the only Asian and Muslim staff members in school and so immediately "stood out". For Mrs Iqbal, being visibly Muslim enabled her to challenge the assumptions of the wider staff body, as she remarked in the following incident,

Yeah because they always assume that . . . that you must have had an arranged marriage and that you've done this and you've done that, and I'm like NO.

(Interview 1, 46:00–46:12)

For Miss Sumar, this involved contending with the views of pupils' parents,

Their parents were saying stuff like y'know all Muslims are terrorists, that sort of stuff . . . I felt like I had this additional responsibility in a sense . . . I felt like I had to try and be the best that I could. (Interview 7, 39:10–41:28)

This kind of *ambassadorial* role modelling, through "breaking stereotypes", echoes the influence of representatives like Mo Farah and Nadiya Hussain. On the one hand, something like these celebrities' capacity to present a 'palatable' Muslim for white, non-Muslims was arguably present here. Yet, [Everington \(2015\)](#) has noted how the use of 'personal life knowledge' by Muslim teachers can bridge ontological gaps with non-Muslim pupils to challenge their views. By sharing their experiences, they were able to act as interlocutors between their world (as Muslims) and the worlds of their non-Muslim students and staff. So, whereas these celebrities are "walking, talking evidence" on television, these teachers were able to incorporate local narratives into their teaching. Doing so meant they were able to challenge to prevailing racist, Islamophobic discourses surrounding Muslims in Britain by relating specifically to the pupils as part of their community.

Acting as ambassadors was especially important if they worked in predominantly white schools or local contexts, adding a demographical dimension to their sense of leadership. Some participants noted that they were "the only chance" that non-Muslims would have to speak to a Muslim (Mr Chowdhury, Interview 18, 27:17–37:32). As the only "brown Muslim" in the area, Mr Chowdhury explained this further

Well, you know, I made it very clear, you see, from when . . . When I got my feet in, you know, I became more established, you know, I would share personal stories with students. I was very explicit with my experiences . . . To make [RE] real, I had a huge advantage of being a brown Muslim who had experienced it, than just a normal, white RE teacher who is referring to examples. (Interview 18, 27:17–37:32)

Here Mr Chowdhury had configured his experience of being a Muslim in a predominantly white area as a pedagogical resource in the classroom. These experiences reveal an entanglement of race and faith in their experience of ambassadorship, almost being forced to occupy ambassadorial role modelling positions in predominantly white contexts given their obvious racial differences. [Basit et al. \(2007\)](#) have also noted this entanglement in the experience of BME teachers more widely.

Yet, in the case of ‘Muslim RE teachers’ their lack of representation both in teaching and within their local contexts almost necessitates that they act as *ambassadorial* role models, reifying the hypervisibility of ‘Muslimness’ and the unique professional discourses surrounding the RE teacher that explicitly incorporates aspects of faith and race into the role. Furthermore, this was even the case for those working in more ethnically diverse contexts, in terms of “*Muslim*” *role modelling* (discussed later).

As such, their position as *ambassadors* for non-Muslims reflects an important representational authority at this local level. In many ways this kind of representative position reflects Jones et al. (2015, p. 218) description of *standing*: where individuals use their prominence to represent the Muslim community to others and ‘speak out’ on their behalf. In the case of ‘Muslim RE teachers’, their prominence comes from their proximity and the authority of being a teacher—they meet many non-Muslim pupils who have to listen to them. Equally for Muslim pupils, this combination of teacher authority and proximity, in conjunction with their visible ‘Muslimness’, encouraged these ‘Muslim RE teachers’ to occupy various representative positions.

#### 4.2. “Muslim” Role Modelling

Many of the participants also felt that they were role models for, and seen as role models by, Muslim pupils. Their shared faith identity evoked feelings of the *Ummah* in their relationships with Muslim pupils (Mrs Khan, Fieldnotes 16, March 2017, p. 76). This sense of shared identity was also reified by shared experiences of racism. These feelings of being part of a shared faith community, coupled with their position as teachers of religion (even though non-confessional), led to the participants being positioned as “*Muslim*” *role models* by Muslim pupils.

The participants’ idea of role modelling for Muslim pupils primarily centred around a more typical understanding of being an example to follow. This kind of influence was most apparent in the case of female teachers becoming role models for Muslim girls. Given that most of the participants in this study were Asian Muslim women, ‘role modelness’ reflected their own biographies. They empathised with Muslim girls, sharing their experiences of growing up, wearing the hijab, and going through the British education system;

I felt it because it was a school . . . [with a] Muslim majority, Bengali background, just like me—home situation just like me, a lot of girls who were literally like how I was when I was in Sixth Form, so they used to come to me and be like “Oh Miss how was Uni? How did you cope with this?”—they saw me as somebody who had already gone through it and had come out of it still with my faith intact, and so they wanted to know. (Miss Sumar, Interview 7, 1:18:29–1:20:21)

Mrs Iqbal’s response when asked if she considered herself as a role model hints at the extent of influence that these teachers had as role models for their female Muslim pupils. She alludes to some adopting the hijab due to her example;

Yeah definitely, like especially for the girls, I mean there’s been quite a few of the girls that have started wearing hijab, which I thought was interesting. (Mrs Iqbal, Interview 1, 19:34–21:23)

Mrs Iqbal’s account is a powerful statement of the participants’ potential influence in how Muslim pupils understood and embodied their faith. I would tentatively suggest that a (perceived) lack of female Muslim leadership more widely contributed to the importance that these teachers placed on being role models for Muslim girls, and so these teachers moved in to fill this gap. Specifically, their role modelling resonates with the examples I previously highlighted—Khan (2018) photography and the *Women Like Us* tv series (Choudhry 2018)—with a message to Muslim girls that they can be Muslim and do these things (like go to University and go into teaching). As such, the experience of female ‘Muslim RE teachers’ seems to reveal a gap in contemporary Muslim leadership: role models for young British Muslim girls.

However, the participants were also positioned as role models by Muslim pupils, whether they wanted to take on this leadership role or not. Mr Ali explained this process;

When I became a teacher, I made it absolutely clear that I refused to be a role model because that's too much pressure for me, because one mistake can be magnified. But it's happened. I notice it all the time. Moreso in the last couple of years of my teaching, and I first feared it quite a lot. I'm like 'pppfffft' this is a big burden on my shoulders, but actually it's made me think about what I say and do a bit more—which is a positive thing. And if I want to be a mirror of what I want my [Muslim] students to be—in terms of the character and the way they think, then I'm like okay no problem then. (Interview 8, 45:24–47:15)

Evident in Mr Ali's account is a conflation from Muslim pupils of these participants' teacher and faith identities, constructing them as '*Muslim RE teachers*' and then positioning the teachers as role models. It is possible that, in part, this reflects the pupils' blurring the boundaries between their state education and any supplementary Islamic education, through a shared construction of '*Muslim teacher*'. This brought with it, willingly or unwillingly, a commitment to dealing with matters of religion as part of their teaching role, as they ended up dealing with Muslim pupils' religious needs and concerns.

Despite the general willingness from the participants to become role models for Muslim pupils in this way, for some there was apprehension. There were an array of concerns surrounding the 'religious' appropriateness of offering guidance, and the potential eschatological implications of this for themselves and for the Muslim pupils who acted on their advice. Above, Mr Ali spoke of a "fear" and "pressure" that came with role modelling, along with the "magnification" of mistakes. Similarly, Miss Noor expressed her reservations surrounding being a source of sex and relationships advice for a Muslim girl who was brought to her attention from another staff member;

I know for a fact that she didn't want me to know, and I wouldn't even know how to deal with that. 'Cos I'm a Muslim doesn't mean I'm going to be able to say to her "Oh you're going to Hell"—it's out of my league! I can come to her in terms of religious knowledge—as to what to say—but like I can't give fatwas, like that's not within my control. (Interview 10.2, 20:09–24:12)

These apprehensions begin to show the contours of role modelling as a representative position by exposing some theological and eschatological limitations. As Mr Ali and Miss Noor expressed, there was an implicit understanding that the kind of guidance they should provide should be restricted in relation to other sources of guidance for Muslim children—such as their parents and traditional Islamic authorities. Their apprehensions and concerns are important here considering the responsibilities that Muslim pupils seemed to put upon them, which blurred the boundaries between religious and non-religious authority. Yet, these apprehensions did not stop either Mr Ali or Miss Noor from giving advice or acting as an example for Muslim pupils.

It is worth noting an interesting proximal element to this relationship. Unlike other local or national Muslim leadership, Muslim pupils would have access to these teachers consistently for many hours throughout the week during the school year, usually discussing explicitly religious topics (as part of RE). Hence, there is simply more time and opportunity for these teachers to affect, influence and act as examples for Muslim pupils to follow, even though their teaching was non-confessional. This point is particularly pertinent given some participants' explicit positioning alongside, or even against, other Muslim leaders, which is discussed later in the paper. Additionally, being in proximity begins to reveal the importance of 'tactical', local forms of Muslim leadership.

Furthermore, the impact of hypervisibility, and the underpinning intersections of race, gender and faith, also affected the positioning of '*Muslim RE teachers*' as leaders in this way. As a white male convert working in a predominantly white school, Mr Jones discussed being able to "hide" his Muslim identity whilst in school, even after his 'outing' by another staff member (Interview 6, 39:06–44:23).

Although his faith was known by some staff, he did not feel encouraged to draw upon his Muslim identity, nor was it known to his pupils. Elsewhere, Mrs Khan, who did not wear the hijab and worked in a Muslim-majority school, faced questions from Muslim pupils over her sartorial choices (Fieldnotes 16, March 2017, p. 23). The notion of *ambassadorship* and *role modelling*, then, seems to be somewhat predicated on ‘looking Muslim’ as a catalyst, and operates within Muslim school communities. Future research into the intersections of ‘whiteness’ and Muslim leadership in the case of Muslim converts could elucidate this further.

Thus, participants’ positioning as role models for Muslim pupils brought with it a whole aspect of their non-confessional work that was explicitly concerned with matters of faith, bringing added responsibility to their role. In the main, by acting as role models in this capacity the participants seem to be filling an important space between traditional sources of authority and guidance: parents and the mosque. Writing in a Swedish context, Berglund (2012) has also noted the tendency for Muslim pupils to use (Muslim and non-Muslim) teachers as sources of guidance, given their proximity and authority as educators. Thus, I would argue that the participants seemingly inevitable positioning as role models for Muslim pupils reveals a significant space for Muslim leadership *between* traditional sources of authority and representation. Moreover, there seems to be a need for Muslim leaders that Muslims, especially young Muslim girls, can just approach to share their concerns. In a way, the non-confessional aspect of these teachers’ teaching of religion was seen to be a benefit here, creating the sense that they were not there to judge, unlike Muslim parents or the imam, even though their influence and guidance may have a normative effect.

Therefore, I would argue that the experiences of ‘Muslim RE teachers’ reveals role modelling to be an important representative position and form of leadership for Muslims at a local level. Role modelling here is distinct from the *ambassadorial* mode, discussed previously, as it is leadership for Muslims, but it is also distinct from what can be understood as *religious authority* because their authority does not come from within traditional sources and sites. Rather, the position of role model itself comes from being an accepted example to follow as an interlocutor between tradition and everyday life. As such, I suggest that role modelling should be added to the typology of representative positions, reflecting its importance as an interlocutory form of leadership in this way.

#### 4.3. Muslim Representatives

The participants’ *expertise* as teachers was also recognised by Muslim parents, reflecting this mode of representation. Some participants spoke of how Muslim parents had approached them to “represent them” within school (Mrs Iqbal, Interview 1, 21:42–21:51). For Muslim parents, they seemed to have this authority by virtue of their positions within their schools, their knowledge and responsibilities as teachers of religion,<sup>1</sup> and, to some extent, the reputation they had gained as role models for their Muslim pupils. As such, they were seen to be able to bring “Muslim issues” to the table of their school’s Senior Leadership Teams (SLTs).

As such, some of the participants were able to use their professional expertise to effect policy and practice in their schools. Their knowledge and position allowed them to navigate their school’s policy frameworks and bring “Muslim issues” to the attention of the school’s SLT. As a result, some had affected institutional change by leading faith-based initiatives in their schools, such as Miss Aziz’s “lunchtime Ramadan club” (Fieldnotes 19, July 2017, p. 17), or Miss Ahmed’s “faith talk” series (Interview 3, 43:52–47:48). It was also common practice for these teachers to facilitate lunchtime prayers in their classrooms for Muslim pupils (Miss Memon, Interview 15, 1:17:52–1:25:00). Additionally, this recognition also seemed to be supported by their school SLTs, as part of their job was “something to do with religion”, despite their role being ostensibly “secular” (Mr Jones, Fieldnotes 6, June 2017,

<sup>1</sup> With a possible conflation of the participants as ‘Muslim RE teachers’ with teachers of Islam—those who taught in the *madrassah*. Several participants mentioned that this kind of conflation was commonplace amongst Muslim parents.

p. 9). In a field interview with Miss Aziz's headteacher, she made it clear that the 'lunchtime Ramadan club' only happened because Miss Aziz had taken the lead on the initiative, as the head neither had the time or knowledge to implement such support (Miss Aziz, Fieldnotes 19, July 2017, pp. 25–26). This kind of representation has been noted in wider BME teacher literature: as a consequence of role modelling BME teachers can become spokespeople for BME needs and issues within their schools, which is especially valuable given the 'whiteness' of SLTs (Coleman and Campbell-Stephens 2010).

Therefore, their positioning as *experts*, both as Muslims and as teachers of Religious Education, allowed some of the participants to act as interlocutors to affect policy and practice within their school. Their capacity to shape institutional policy and practice through *expertise* is identified by Jones et al. (2015) as a representative position. Yet, it is interesting to consider how successful these participants were in relation to attempts to change educational policy by "official" representative bodies and external experts. There seems to be a sense that, by virtue of being part of the school, these teachers were able to better frame "Muslim needs" as educational and just get on and make these changes, especially if they were able to take the lead and implement them. In contrast, recommendations made by the Muslim Council of Britain (2007) were perceived by schools as 'demands' (Baker 2007), and which 'cut across' the guidance of other representative groups (Jones et al. 2015, p. 215). This seems to suggest that there is a difference in the form and effectiveness of leadership at the local level. Like Muslim chaplains (Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013), their professional expertise allows them to bring change from within the policy frameworks of these ostensibly 'secular' institutions.

I suggest that the capacity for 'Muslim RE teachers' to effect policy and practice reflects an important distinction between 'tactical' and 'strategic' modes of Muslim leadership. To illustrate this here, whereas the MCB tried to affect change from above, 'Muslim RE teachers' were able to creatively and tactically bring change from within, at ground level, arguably to greater effect. The presence of 'tactical' forms of Muslim leadership are therefore potentially important for bringing the change that wider, 'strategic' Muslim leaders also seek to implement by being able to operate within the established powers and frameworks of British institutions. If so, this highlights a significant analytical problem for looking at Muslim leadership solely at the 'strategic' national level or in 'traditional' religious authorities, where this focus misses these more creative and 'hidden', yet potentially impactful forms of Muslim leadership.

#### 4.4. Religious Authority

Alongside these more 'tactical' expressions of Muslim leadership, participants tentatively had claims to be a *religious authority* within their local Muslim communities. Even though their job as RE teachers is 'non-religious', and despite the reservations some felt around role modelling, the other representative positions that they occupy seemed to coalesce and culminate in their positioning in relation to other Muslim leaders, by themselves and other Muslims. What is fascinating is how their professional expertise as RE teachers and knowledge of World Religions from a Western academic perspective became understood, by themselves and others, as evidence of their religious credentials, constructing them akin to *alims* and *alimahs*.

Where Gilliat-Ray (2010, p. 54) highlights claims to authenticity as an important mode of religious authority, these credentials and positions seemed to give some participants the authority to make such claims. For example, their commitment to "breaking stereotypes" extended to "traditional" Islamic stereotypes held within their wider communities, further reinforcing their authority through claims of authenticity surrounding what was, or was not, "Islam". Several participants made clear a distinction between what was "culture" and what was "actually Islam" in their teaching, especially about Muslim women. Breaking down stereotypes in this instance concerned breaking down the "cultural" norms that pupils espoused as correct Islamic beliefs. Miss Ahmed spoke of using her "faith talks" for this purpose;

I mean I used to do lots of different things, different activities, I took about 200 girls, it was like a proper assembly every week for half an hour, so sometimes I got some girls to

do a role play, or take part in different things—just imagine there is no-one there and just speak—because you need to learn what Islam is and what culture is. Because it is a shame. And the reason that it happens in [area] is because then they get married to people from back in Pakistan. It was never, what can you say, they wouldn't ever question what Islam is, and what religion actually is. (Interview 3, 1:06:50–1:10:14)

Miss Meer recounted challenging the views of Muslim parents:

So, you know, even stereotypes within the Muslim community is something that I wanted to battle. What I have found lately, and it is something that really frustrates me, is even getting respect from men in the Muslim community is sometimes . . . If you're not wearing a hijab, then, you know, go home, sort yourself out, or come back with a gentleman, come back with your husband or your Dad. And that's the way it is. And that's something that's always frustrated me. (Interview 17, 12:24–17:53)

The authority of the participants afforded by their role as RE teachers allows them to engage with, and challenge, prevailing narratives within their communities, in a variety of ways that are arguably hidden from “official” sources of authority outside the school gates. Miss Meer's account is particularly powerful, demonstrating the capacity for Muslim women to deploy their state-given authority as teachers to challenge the views of Muslim men in the classroom and at parents' evenings. Through their Muslim pupils, this is coupled with their position as “Muslim” *role models* to shape the beliefs and values of their local Muslim communities beyond the school gates. Again, the potential impact of their voice, given that these participants were at the heart of many Muslim pupils' education about religion through their statutory RE lessons, cannot be understated.

As such, several participants tentatively recognised themselves as Muslim leaders within their communities in this way. Miss Meer remarked that teaching “gave her a voice”;

And my Mum's always said, keep your mouth shut, keep your mouth shut, because the community aren't going to look at you well. And I thought, no. And I guess teaching gives me that voice. (Interview 17, 12:24–17:53)

Others explicitly put themselves, or were put, in competition with the “local imam”, like Mr Shah;

Because sometimes I feel as though I am doing the job of their imam for them, where I'm actually exposing, not exposing them [pupils], I'm enabling them to understand that Islam is much more than just a religion of rituals and practices and growing beards and covering your head and hitting the ground with your forehead and throwing pebbles in Mecca. (Interview 13, 50:34–57:20)

Mr Jones took this further;

I think the biggest problem . . . is this fear of infection by ideas that we couldn't counter. Y'know that we—I don't know if Muslim parents do withdraw their kids from RE—they might feel that that's putting their head above the parapet, but there's certainly a sense of real guardedness about engaging with RE for fear that you'll . . . like somehow the pristine pure theology that we're so carefully curating in the mosque will get undermined. And who is it who says—the sign of an educated man is that he can entertain a thought without believing it? And I just feel that the community, if we can call it collectively, is very bad at doing that—they don't think you can do that, there's almost an a priori impossibility that I'm entertaining a thought—“Oh I must believe it!” (Interview 6, 1:24:40–1:27:00)

These accounts powerfully suggest that these teachers represent a different kind of authority to that of the local imam, in turn putting them on the leadership map. Their commitment to exploring the meaning of Islamic beliefs, not just the “rituals and practices, especially with a critical edge, and

awareness of other worldviews, resonate with wider critiques of Islamic education (Gilliat-Ray 2006, p. 67; Sahin 2013). In turn, they attend to this gap by bringing their Islamic knowledge into the professional and pedagogical frameworks of RE teaching. Again, this reflects a kind of ‘tactical’, interlocutory leadership that sits between what is traditionally understood as Muslim authority and leadership, by incorporating more ‘secular’ modes and frameworks.

Therefore, by working at the ‘tactical’ level some of these participants are seemingly able to subvert “official” authorities and discourses. Particularly for the female participants, they are using their authority ‘on the ground’ to challenge and subvert traditional norms within their Muslim communities. Others are subverting what they see is being taught in their local mosque, encouraging critical reflection and emphasis on the meaning of beliefs and practices, in turn highlighting the shortcomings of their local imam. They can do so because they are given time and space within their RE classrooms and are recognised as authorities within the daily lives of Muslim schoolchildren.

## 5. Concluding Discussion

This article has argued that ‘Muslim RE teachers’ can be considered as a case of Muslim leadership that represents a localised, ‘tactical’ form. Their experience being *ambassadors* to non-Muslim pupils, parents, and staff, “breaking stereotypes” encountered within their school contexts, acting as *role models* for Muslim pupils, changing school policy and practice to *represent* the needs of Muslim pupils, to actively engaging with Islamic discourses with their communities, reflects their capacity to adopt various representational positions that broadly correlate with the wider forms of leadership outlined by Jones et al. (2015). Yet, in contrast to more ‘strategic’ modes of Muslim leadership, their modes of representation manifest in ‘tactical’, interlocutory forms that operate within and between the policy frameworks and practices of British ‘secular’ state education and “official” sources of religious leadership within their local Muslim communities. *Role modelling* seems to be a particularly significant manifestation of this kind of representative position—as someone who can bridge the gap between tradition and everyday life in contemporary Britain. So, whilst their sphere of influence is largely felt directly in their local contexts, their impact on Muslim and non-Muslim pupils and parents, and on schools’ professional communities, is potentially far reaching.

Given the potential of ‘tactical’ forms of Muslim leadership, there is a pressing need to reflect on which ‘claim makers’ are being prioritised. As Jones et al. (2015) admit, analyses of Muslim leadership tend to prioritise the “official”, the national, and those orientated toward policy—‘strategic’ forms of Muslim leadership. Although these actors and groups are important on the national stage, this gaze can miss how Muslims are affecting change and leading from within various ‘secular’ British spaces on the ground. Considering the influence of these ‘Muslim RE teachers’ and the impact of Muslim chaplains, as highlighted by Gilliat-Ray et al. (2013), these kinds of actors could represent this kind of ‘tactical’ Muslim leadership, as individuals that are leading from within both British institutions and Muslim communities, and blending, the frameworks of British institutions, Muslim communities, and Islamic traditions. This is particularly important given the potential of these ‘tactical’ leaders to augment or subvert the discourses coming from “official” sources through their work with Muslims ‘on the street’ in their everyday lives.

Finally, ‘tactical’ Muslim leadership seems to have been taken up by Muslim women in this instance, potentially revealing new spaces for female Muslim leadership in Britain. Scholars have highlighted how Muslim women are using education to challenge existing leadership structures and create their own (Bano 2017; Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015), but these discussions have emphasised traditional sites of Islamic education. Yet here, in the case of Muslim chaplains (Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013), and arguably like Baroness Sayeeda Warsi, Muslim women seem to be occupying leadership positions beyond these traditional sites based on wider educational and professional authority, which then allows them to engage in religious debates. Where the ‘tactical’ works around and in response to power, I suggest that this is the case here with Muslim women working around and between the “official” hierarchies of power to shape Muslim identity from the ground up.

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