

How Religion Gets Stolen — Masculinity, Race and Political Power

Academic keynote (15 minutes) — Faith & VAWG Coalition Annual Conference 2026, “Unholy Alliance: Women, Race, Faith and the Far Right.” Prof. Tahir Abbas, Aston University.

[SLIDE 1 — TITLE — on screen as you begin]

Thank you. I want to start in Birmingham, the city where I work.

In 1968, Enoch Powell stood up in that city and told the country it was “mad” to admit immigrants, and prophesied rivers of blood. In May last year, our own Prime Minister warned that Britain risked becoming an “island of strangers.” Two speeches, nearly sixty years apart, same anxiety, same grammar: the nation imagined as a body under threat, and a racialised population cast as the threat.

What sits underneath both of those speeches is something I want to name very precisely this morning. It is the theft of religion. Because the story that runs from Powell to the present day is not really an argument about faith at all. Nobody in it is debating theology. What is happening is that religion is being *taken* — lifted out of the hands of the people who actually live it, and repurposed as a weapon in a contest about race, about masculinity, and about political power.

(pause)

[ADVANCE TO SLIDE 2 — “Religion, stolen twice over”]

And it gets stolen twice over.

On the one hand, Islam is stolen to become *the threat* in the story — what scholars call a floating signifier of otherness, a word that has stopped meaning “a faith” and started meaning “a danger.” Muslims are not a race in any biological sense, but Muslim identity is *racialised* — treated as if it were a fixed, inherited, bodily fact. Tariq Modood gave us the language for this decades ago: alongside the racism of skin, there is a *cultural* racism, aimed at perceived deviation from a secular-Christian norm.

On the other hand — the right-hand side of the slide — Britishness, the flag, an implicitly Christian national identity, is stolen to become *the weapon*. A recent study of England’s streets makes this vivid. From the middle of last year, an organised campaign — Operation Raise the Colours — began saturating

residential England with St George's Crosses and Union Jacks. And the researchers found something important: the flag is *bipolar*. It is at once the lawful emblem of the British state and an emblem available to be appropriated by the radical right.

And it is *engineered*. This is not a spontaneous welling-up of popular feeling. It is cable ties bought wholesale, lampposts targeted systematically, a charity reportedly spending two thousand pounds on flags in a single bankrupt council area. One flag-raiser in that study wanted his flags to look “professional,” distinct from the “scruffy EDL types.” That is the whole machinery in a sentence: the content does not change, only the packaging — the far right laundered into respectable patriotism. We call it mainstreaming, and what the flags show us is mainstreaming made *spatial*.

So hold onto that: religion is stolen twice — Islam as the threat, the flag as the weapon. My job now is to show you who pays for that theft, and — this is the part I most want you to leave with — who is quietly refusing it.

(pause)

[ADVANCE TO SLIDE 3 — “The credential reversal”]

Here is where my own work comes in, the paper I have recently published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*.

We started from something Nabil Khattab established long ago: that Muslims face the largest employment penalties of any group in the British labour market — their CVs rejected at higher rates, their degrees failing to convert into fair jobs. So we asked a simple question. What does that do to their faith in the institutions of the state? We analysed twenty years of survey data, and we found what we call a *credential reversal*.

Look at the chart. For the white British majority — the green bar — education does exactly what the meritocratic story promises. The more educated you are, the more you trust the system, because the system rewarded you, and you now have a stake in it. A degree is a golden ticket into belonging.

For British Muslims — the amber bar — that formula is violently inverted. The more educated a British Muslim becomes, the *less* they trust the institutions of the state. The degree does not buy belonging. It buys exposure — to the corporate recruiters, the university administrators, the Prevent duty embedded in your own campus, the managers who read your name and your face and your headscarf as a question mark.

And notice the middle bar. We tested whether this was just a general minority effect. It is not. For Hindu, Sikh, Caribbean and other minority respondents, education works normally. The penalty is *uniquely Muslim*. The British state is perfectly capable of welcoming the educated Hindu or Caribbean professional. It is the Muslim, specifically, whose success triggers suspicion rather than reward. That is Modood's cultural racism, proven in the data.

We have a name for what this produces in people. We call it "alienated competence." These are not disengaged citizens. They understand the democratic system better than almost anyone — and they withdraw from it precisely *because* they understand it. Not apathy. A rational reading of a system that surveils them under the language of diversity.

(pause)

[ADVANCE TO SLIDE 4 — "Penalised most in the labour market..."]

Now I want to bring the women of this story to the centre, because this is your conference.

Three numbers. On the left: audit studies find up to *thirty per cent* lower call-back rates for CVs carrying Muslim-identifying names, despite identical qualifications. And it is Muslim *women* — particularly those who are visibly observant, who wear the hijab — who carry the very worst of those employment penalties.

So you would expect them to be the most alienated of all. And here is the finding that stops me every time. The middle number: among UK-born Muslim women, faith in institutions does not collapse — it *surges*, by a coefficient of plus seven point two four. It is the highest baseline trust of any group in our data. Compare that to the number on the right: among UK-born Muslim *men*, trust falls off a cliff. The generational divide is real, but it is *gendered* — the despair is concentrated among the men; the women hold the line.

And this resilience runs deep. When we statistically strip out the discrimination these women endure — when we imagine, for a moment, a Britain in which they faced only the hostility of the white majority — their democratic faith does not just hold up, it outstrips everyone else's. They are maintaining that faith *despite* the hostile environment, not because they have been spared it.

We have a name for this too. We call it "strategically engaged realism." These women stand at the exact intersection of religious, racial and gendered hostility — the worst treated in the labour market — and they refuse to cede their democratic claim to a state that treats them with suspicion. They are not naïve.

They are the realists. They are the anchors of civic faith inside their own communities, using the very system that excludes them to dismantle the barriers in front of them.

(pause)

[ADVANCE TO SLIDE 5 — “The protection paradox”]

Which brings me to the heart of why we are all in this room. Masculinity.

The contemporary far right does not present itself as a project of hatred. It presents itself as a project of *protection* — protecting British women and girls. The manosphere feeds it. Tommy Robinson tells tens of thousands at a London rally to prepare for a “battle of Britain,” and the enemy is always, somewhere in the frame, a racialised man coming for “our” women.

But here is the inversion that the street-level research lays bare. The women who experience the most acute, bodily fear in response to all this flag-saturation are precisely the women these movements mark as targets.

Read the quote on the screen. One young woman, Noor, described changing her clothes before entering a heavily flagged area. She won’t take off her hijab — but she’ll swap a black abaya for a pink maxi skirt, in her words, “just so I look less Muslim, even though I know I’m still going to look Muslim.” That is the protection paradox: the rhetoric of protecting women operates by manufacturing fear in *another* set of women. As Caron Gentry argues, you cannot separate misogynist violence from racist violence — they are the same sorting machine, deciding which women are protectable, and which are the threat.

And notice how gendered the whole apparatus is on both sides. In that street study, the men articulate fear in the abstract — they worry about election results, about the direction of the country. The women carry it in their bodies, in their routes home, in the safety alarms handed out at the mosque. Noor, who works in a Birmingham boys’ school, says they now deal with a far-right incident — a Nazi salute, racist abuse — almost every single week. Religion gets stolen *through* masculinity: repackaged as a story of men, of nation, and of the defence of honour.

(pause — let the closing line land)

So let me end on the line at the bottom of this slide. When you hear that Muslims are failing to integrate, reach for the inversion. British Muslims — the overwhelming majority born and educated here — have met every condition asked of them. The qualifications, the civic engagement, the faith. The philosopher Jacques Derrida reminds us that genuine hospitality means

welcoming the other *without* demanding endless proof of their worthiness. That British Muslims' credentials trigger scrutiny rather than trust does not reveal *their* failure to integrate. It reveals our institutions' failure to integrate *them*.

Religion gets stolen when faith is turned into a counter in someone else's contest about race and power. Our task — yours, in this coalition — is to give it back. To read the language of “protecting women” with the scepticism it has earned. And to recognise that the women being marked as the threat are, in fact, the ones still holding the democratic promise open for the rest of us.

Thank you.

[Leave SLIDE 5 on screen for the Q&A]