

Professor Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor

Beyond Confessional-Academic Dichotomies in Islam Studies: Understanding Criticality and Rigour in Traditional Islamic Studies

Islamic studies, or for that matter any study, is by no means a neutral endeavour in objective academic research. My feminist epistemology insists that objectivity in research and academic production is nigh impossible. Social hierarchies, as articulated in political agendas, often determine what is taught in Islamic studies courses, by whom and to whom. Contemporary Islamic studies in Europe has become characterised by a pejorative dichotomy between so-called 'academic' and 'confessional' approaches to the study of Islam. In a recent piece of research, I reflected on the artificiality of this dichotomy and I suggested that one way to resolve this debate is to move away from it and to instead interrogate the social hierarchies that underpin it.

This paper briefly charts the evolution of the study of Islam, emphasising the sociological stimuli and motivations that cause it to grow as a field of study. It explores historical legacies within Islamic Studies around criticality, multi-disciplinarily, intellectual-debate and respect. It uses examples from empirical work around Islamic Studies in Britain, and beyond, to reflect on how and why these rich legacies have been diluted, focussing in particular in two areas: shared intra-Muslim learning and women's studies. More young Muslims than ever before are studying Islam in both academic and traditional settings, in Britain and Europe. As they do so, these institutions and their educational models are being modified by the intersectional identities and debates that these young people bring with them. A question facing all of academia (whether 'academic' or 'confessional') is – how do we respond to these changes to build stronger, more sustainable and more relevant Islamic Studies curricula?



Professor Sariya Cheruvallil-Contractor **Coventry University**

Prof. Cheruvallil-Contractor is Associate Professor in the Sociology of Islam at the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University. She is Chair (2020-2023) of the Muslims in Britain Research Network (MBRN). As a feminist sociologist of religion, she interrogates the power dynamics within knowledge production, and the implications of the processes and systems of knowledge for society as a whole. Her publications include among others, *'Muslim Women in Britain: Demystifying the Muslimah'* (Routledge 2012), *'Religion or Belief, Discrimination and Equality: Britain in Global Contexts'* (Bloomsbury 2013), *'Islamic Education in Britain: New Pluralist Paradigms'* (Bloomsbury 2015), *'Digital Methodologies in the Sociology of Religion'* (Bloomsbury 2015) and *'Islam on Campus: Contested Identities and the Cultures of Higher Education'* (OUP 2020).