

British, female, Muslim, and typecast

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Professor Mona Siddiqui is a go-to woman when reporters want a sound-bite on the latest Islamic story. But there is more going on beneath the surface, she tells **Sarah Meyrick**



KNOWN to millions of the Radio 4 *Today* programme's listeners for her regular contributions to *Thought for the Day*, Professor Mona Siddiqui is regarded as a leading commentator on religious affairs in the UK.

Besides appearing on Radio 4 and Five Live, she is frequently on air for BBC Scotland. A prominent and articulate woman Muslim, she is, she says, "rent-a-gob for everything Islam". That has its frustrations.

"I'm always asked about what I think 'as a Muslim woman', as opposed to a person who happens to be a Muslim," she says. "It's not as if I get out of bed in the morning and ask myself how I'm going to be a British Muslim woman today.

"I think it's partly about ethnicity, and gender; and, yes, it can be annoying. But, at the same time, I'm very blessed. If I'm asked [for a comment], I do feel I should say 'Yes.' That way, I can't criticise others for saying things I don't want to hear. There are other voices around, but I don't see a wave of people coming forward."

One reason she is asked, of course, is that her contributions are measured and intelligent. She is a respected academic - currently she is Professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Her areas of specialism are classical Islamic law; law and gender; early Islamic thought; and contemporary legal and ethical issues in Islam.

Her books include *How to Read the Qur'an*, *The Good Muslim: Reflections on classical Islamic law and theology*, and *Christians, Muslims and Jesus*.

Now, for the first time, she has written a more personal book: *My Way: A Muslim woman's journey*, based on her own life story. It is part memoir and part theological reflection. She considers contemporary concerns and issues of faith and identity, as observed from her experiences growing up as Muslim in a Western country, and sets out to challenge what she regards as lazy stereotyping and polarised thinking about Islam and the West.

SHE says that she wrote it with her *Thought for the Day* listeners in mind, who often write in after hearing her on the radio. "In fact, a friend of mine said it was a 75,000-word *Thought*," she says. "But I'd say it's for an in- formed reader - probably Western, and possibly secular, but who is interested in these ideas."

It was a suggestion that her publisher put to her some years ago, she says, but she rejected until now that she is in her early fifties. "It didn't feel right before. I wasn't ready until now. Perhaps, as you get older, you think back over your life."

Professor Siddiqui's life began in Karachi, Pakistan, although she moved with her family to Britain at the age of four, and remembers almost nothing of life beforehand.

Her father was a psychiatrist, and the family lived in Cambridge, to start with, before settling in Huddersfield, where she and her family of two sisters and three brothers grew up. The first few years, she writes, are hazy in her memory, and, because the move was not really talked about, she assumed for some time that the family would be returning to Pakistan.

"Our parents never discussed their move with us, and, in those early years, we didn't see fit to ask them," she writes. "They must have been similar to so many of their generation who just decided to leave the subcontinent in search of a different and, hopefully, better life in the UK."

Nor, she says, was there any discussion of "identity", or how it felt to be Muslims living in Britain. "My parents didn't think about being British. There was a sense that they were able to live a good life here, and we were thankful for that, but identity was not talked about in those days. I think

society today would benefit if there was more constructive conversation about our contribution as individuals, and we didn't obsess about identity all the time."

PRAYER and worship were part of the culture of the family, and faith was always there. "I gradually realised that, whenever I spoke of God, I associated my belief in God with a way of looking at life as whole rather than as a collection of rules to be obeyed.

"God was present in my relationships, my work, in a whole set of freedoms in the world. Belief was about seeing glimpses of the divine in the ordinariness of life, and, in a way, that is fundamentally how I carried God inside me, within a perpetual conversation."

She paints a picture of a close and loving family. Social life - especially for the girls - was constrained, although her mother told her later that she had made a conscious effort to observe how young people were brought up in Britain.

There was a great emphasis on education and learning. Her father, she appreciated only some years later, had been born in a small and very poor village in India, but had been encouraged by an aunt to escape into a successful career in medicine. Her mother, meanwhile, had clear ideas about what she wanted for her three daughters: one would be a doctor; one a barrister; and one a university lecturer. They each conformed.

She herself took a first degree in Arabic and French at the University of Leeds, before completing an MA in Middle Eastern Studies, and a Ph.D. in Classical Islamic Law at the University of Manchester. She moved to Glasgow in the 1990s, when she got married; and, in 1998, founded the Centre for the Study of Islam.

PROFESSOR SIDDIQUI's marriage was an arranged one (she and her husband, Farhaj, have three sons). "In some ways, I made sense of an arranged marriage by having faith in God, believing that there would be a good and happy outcome if I continued to trust God, try to be a loving wife, and be patient and confident," she writes.

"I have been married for over 22 years now, and if I was to distil three important elements to a happy marriage, a good marriage, they would be: mutual respect, mutual desire, and the willingness and courage to take the relationship seriously without taking oneself too seriously."

And yet, in Britain today, 42 per cent of marriages end in divorce. "All the studies show that the constant search for happiness is making us unhappy," she says. "Relationships are the most important things in our lives - all of us want to feel loved, and to love. It's not about how people enter into marriage, but what you do when you are in a relationship that matters.

"For that you need care, and discipline, and parameters, and boundaries. Also joy; I'm convinced that, if there is no joy, that relationship won't last."

While it is not enough on its own, she also believes that duty is an undervalued idea in today's society. "We don't talk about duty enough," she says. "Nor about the importance of living a moral life. Personally, I don't think you can be happy if you make the people around you unhappy. Personal faith means that what I want is not always the most important thing. You can call that blind faith, if you like, but it gives meaning to life."



Honoured: Professor Siddiqui after she was presented with her OBE at Buckingham Palace

AS THE book comes out, we are living in a time of turmoil. Professor Siddiqui has long been involved in Christian-Muslim dialogue as an academic (she was awarded an OBE in 2011 for service to interfaith relations). "For me, it's never about conversion, but about using reflection on Christianity as an opportunity to think about my own faith. So, how have Christian concepts of love and hospitality made me think about these as Muslim concepts?" She finds that "people think about God in very similar ways."

But, as she says in *My Way*, the events of 9/11 represented a huge fault-line. "Many now recognise that, over the past 15 years or so, especially after the attacks of 11 September 2001, there has been a shift in the way Islam is viewed: namely, as a political and not just a religious threat to the West.

"It took the tragedy of 9/11, and the subsequent phenomenon of jihadist rhetoric and terrorism, to create a new global political tension."

The problem, she says, is that this has led to a narrative of Islam's being difficult. The words "extremism" and "radicalism" have become so much part of our language that whole communities are now viewed as problematic. "Identity has become everything, and religion means conflict, in the media," she says. "But, in my experience, most people of faith don't think of themselves in these terms."

She cites as an example the recent letter that the Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, sent to 1000 Muslim leaders ([News, 23 January](#)). (The letter was defended by the Prime Minister as "reasonable, sensible, and moderate".)

"The letter said 'Tell your communities to integrate more,'" she says. "But that's a way of talking about concepts that only carries meaning politically, not personally. Belonging doesn't come from political measures.

"Again, there was a recent survey that says Muslim citizens are the most loyal to Britain. What does that mean? Of course, it depends on the question, and how it is asked."

MUCH of her frustration comes from the need for short answers, and the lack of nuance in conversation. "I'm interested in what goes on behind the surface," she says. "As an academic, I know we struggle to get our studies out there in a nuanced way. The detail gets lost."

She describes taking part in a panel discussion not long after the *Charlie Hebdo* murders last month. "There were 140 or so people there, mainly students, and I was amazed at the level of self-flagellation of our liberal democracy, as if that is to blame for everything. I'm happy to go on public record and say: 'No, it's not all our fault, and our freedoms here could be eroded, and that matters.'"

None the less, freedom of expression should not be used to insult people, she says. "The difference is that, in Britain, Christianity has allowed for secularism. The Muslim world has not become secular."

"Many Muslim countries don't have pluralism, and [many] Muslims simply don't accept pluralism. Real pluralism is quite demanding - there are challenges, and people don't want to be challenged."

Professor Siddiqui agrees that some of the current rhetoric around the UKIP agenda is unpleasant. "I've found myself thinking 'This is not the Britain I enjoy living in,' although personally I don't feel under any threat, and I'm surrounded by reasonable people."

"I'm currently writing a book on hospitality, and the Christian tradition of hospitality. It all points to welcoming the stranger in our midst. But now it seems that those coming to our shores are to be feared. Of course, we have to think about our resources, but I worry about that narrative."

"I ask myself: Do most people think like that, or are most people not thinking like that at all? There is a sense that the political reaction is not visionary. Everyone has jumped on a bandwagon, and that's quite destructive. And if we think it's possible to dismiss multiculturalism as something we can just reverse, that would be ludicrous."

[My Way: A Muslim woman's journey](#) by *Mona Siddiqui* is published by *I. B. Tauris* at £20 (Church Times Bookshop special offer £16 - Use code CT388).