

## Interview – Rabea M. Khan

Written by E-International Relations

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# Interview – Rabea M. Khan

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**This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other early career scholars.**

Rabea M. Khan is an early career researcher who completed her PhD in 2021 at the University of St Andrews' School of International Relations. Her PhD thesis was entitled "The Gendered Coloniality of the Religious Terrorism Thesis: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Religious Labels and their Selective Use in Terrorism Studies". Rabea also holds an M.Litt. in International Security Studies from the University of St Andrews in 2015 and prior to that graduated with a BA in International Relations and Law from Oxford Brookes University. She currently holds a temporary lectureship in International Relations at the University of Edinburgh. Rabea has published with *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, *Critical Research on Religion* and has also written a short piece for *The Critical Religion Association*. Her research interests are terrorism, religion, race, gender, post- and decolonial theory, feminist theory and critical discourse analysis. You can follow Rabea on twitter at @RabeaMKhan for updates on her work.

**What (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?**

There are a couple of scholars whose work and/or advice has greatly impacted my own work and the directions my research has taken. This, of course, started with Critical Terrorism scholarship and Richard Jackson's work more generally which I first came across during my undergraduate degree. Later on, it was also the work of Timothy Fitzgerald in *Critical Religion*. However, I believe one of the most foundational moments for me which triggered my interest in the category 'religious terrorism' was when I came across William Cavanaugh's book *The Myth of Religious Violence* during my Master's at St Andrews. It's a great read and remains one of my favourite scholarly books to this day. It also made it clear to me that I had to look outside of IR literature to find answers to the question that inspired my PhD project: Why, despite a lack of empirical evidence, is religious terrorism presented as the most dangerous form of terrorism?

One answer to this question I found in feminist IR literature. Caron Gentry, who later became my supervisor, was the first person who inspired me to look into post-structural feminism, and feminisation as devalorisation, which to me is looking at gender on the macro level, *i.e.* looking at how gender identities are inscribed on to states, concepts, phenomena and not just individual bodies. During my master's at St Andrews I was greatly inspired by one guest lecture she gave in the terrorism module I took. In this lecture she touched on how terrorism in itself is gendered as a form of violence which has been presented and described with feminised language. This is when it clicked for me and I realised, hold on, the modern category of religion, too, is feminised in that way. Feminisation is usually accompanied by devalorisation and notions of danger, disorder, and irrationality which means that the popular perception of religion as universally prone to violence also stems from the feminine gender identity inscribed on to the modern concept of religion. This is essentially the argument I made in my first peer-reviewed article for *Critical Research on Religion*. This idea of the post-Westphalian, Enlightenment concept of religion as an essentially feminised one also provides a (partial) answer to the question that inspired my PhD project: Religious Terrorism is a doubly feminised concept, therefore resulting in perceptions of increased danger and irrationality. Caron Gentry was the first person who immediately believed in the importance of this idea and encouraged me to pursue this further in a

## Interview – Rabea M. Khan

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PhD. She and her work remain a great inspiration.

However, throughout my PhD, I also subsequently encountered the limits of feminist theory. There was something deeper at play here on top of the general feminisation of religious terrorism. This other (and deeper) layer – race, colonialism, and coloniality – I first tried to theorise through a feminist framework as well, which is possible but made me deeply uncomfortable. It did not sit well with me, it did not provide all the answers, it seemed strangely disrespectful even. This is when I realised, I had to go back a little and familiarise myself a little more with all the amazing post- and decolonial work out there. Here, it was the invaluable guidance and advice as well as the great inspiration I got from Jasmine Gani's work in St Andrews. Her work and guidance helped me bridge one of the biggest intellectual struggles I had during my PhD. At this point, I already knew something was missing and that feminist frameworks alone just weren't providing all the answers. Jasmine's decolonial approach in her own work and teaching at St Andrews inspired and facilitated my radical change and shift to decolonial thought and theory in the second half of my PhD where I finally felt like I found my turf. The main argument I made in my PhD thesis is that the category 'religious terrorism' has colonial origins and serves a colonial function. The gendering of it, then, serves that colonial function and is part of and one of many nodes of a coloniality which has produced and continues to produce the category 'religious terrorism' in modernity. I therefore moved away from gender a little (but never completely) and could comfortably make coloniality the focus without having to concede it to a feminist approach where it would then be framed as only one aspect or axis of oppression, covered under the framework of 'intersectionality', but primarily seen through a gender lens. Here, I build on Maria Lugones' work which introduced gender as a fundamental component of coloniality. Whilst Lugones' work centres more on the embodied aspect of gender and coloniality with particular focus on women, I take a more macro approach. This macro approach is inspired by post-structural feminist scholars like Anne Runyan and Spike Peterson (I love their work!). Connecting these ideas, I argue gender is always already part of coloniality and one of the tools through which colonial inventions and constructions are made practicable. This is what I refer to as a gendered coloniality in my thesis.

Other scholars who I've had the privilege to meet and talk to about my research include Robbie Shilliam and Siba Grovogui. Talking to them about my research was extremely reassuring and gave me the feeling that I was onto something and on the right path. This was after I had made the shift from a more feminist-focused to a more decolonial-focused framework; and after I had read *Race and Racism in International Relations* by Robbie Shilliam, Nivi Manchanda and Alexander Anievas.

### **Your current research is situated within the fields of Critical Religion and Critical Terrorism Studies. What are the challenges and advantages of adopting such an interdisciplinary approach?**

I think when it comes to IR there are many more advantages here than challenges. IR is notorious for being late to the party with, well, almost everything. Other disciplines like Anthropology or Sociology have usually done it before when IR claims to do or discover anything new or original. I honestly think that is part of the reason why IR will always benefit from interdisciplinary methods and approaches. There is a lot of material, approaches, frameworks, and ideas out there in other disciplines which IR still needs to engage with and would benefit from engaging with. Take Terrorism Studies – there is so little work within Terrorism Studies on race. However, this is not because it doesn't exist – it does! Scholars have written on it – just not within IR and Terrorism Studies. There is some great work out there, for example by scholars within Sociology, Cultural studies, Anthropology, Psychology (e.g. Tarek Younis) but also Critical Law and Criminology (e.g. Vicki Sentas). However, within IR and Terrorism Studies this is very new and only now beginning to take off.

What made my own excursion into Religious Studies necessary, then, was the fact that there was so much material out there on the colonial origins of 'religion' in modernity – just not within IR and Terrorism Studies. In fact, there is a lot of terrorism research available on the category 'religious terrorism', but almost none of it spends any time defining let alone critically analysing 'religion'. The few terrorism experts who have attempted to define religion (usually in no more than a sentence) have adopted a very colonial, essentialist understanding and definition of religion deriving from a Christian- and European-centric understanding and imagination. This is a significant deficit within IR and Terrorism Studies. Critical Religion, then, which is a rather young sub-discipline that emerged out of Religious Studies, is more interested in the productions and constructions of 'religion' rather than determining what 'religion' is

## Interview – Rabea M. Khan

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or what does and what does not count as a religion. Given that Critical Terrorism Studies does a very similar thing with 'terrorism', it is surprising that it hasn't engaged with Critical Religion yet given that scholars from this discipline actually do discuss 'terrorism' which has been labelled as 'religious' on many occasions. This is an oversight I addressed with my PhD thesis where I dug deeper into the colonial-gendered origins of religion which I argue have also subsequently produced the colonial discourse on 'religious terrorism' more generally.

**As part of a 2021 special issue for *Critical Terrorism Studies*, you discuss the link between the mainstream terrorism discourse after 9/11 and Islamophobia and Neo-Orientalism. Is it possible to dissociate these concepts from each other? If so, how?**

That's a good question. I argue in this reflection piece that the Islamophobia and Neo-Orientalism inherent to so much terrorism research is actually rooted in pre-9/11 discourse as much as it is reflected in post-9/11 discourse. There is more continuity than rupture here between pre- and post-9/11 discourse. As my PhD research has shown, the dominant discourse on terrorism (and especially religious terrorism) serves a colonial function, it therefore predates 9/11 and did not just start with it. Instead, it finds its origins in counterinsurgency practice and literature which has quite unapologetically been used and practiced in colonial contexts, often to suppress anti-colonial, indigenous resistance in colonised countries.

In fact, I would argue the reason why it became so easy to associate terrorism with Islam in dominant discourse and imagination after 9/11 is because the groundwork had already been laid – this groundwork is the colonial and gendered origins of terrorism research more generally. However, it is also rooted in this phenomenon which Jasmine Gani discusses in a recent article on racial militarism with *Security Dialogue*. In it she points to how Islam has a long history of being used to prop up the West's identity and reinstate its superiority precisely because Islam/Muslims have been constructed as closer to the European man on the colonial, racial hierarchy than other races or religions. In other words, it is because of the perceived (historical and geographical) Muslim proximity to Europe that othering Muslims and Islam was more powerful and efficient in signalling European superiority than for example the othering of a society/race/religion which was written off as positioned at the very bottom of the colonial civilisational hierarchy. These nuances in theorising about coloniality and Islam more specifically is something that Shehla Khan (Keele University) also currently works on and which I am hoping to see published soon.

What I also argued in this article is that Critical Terrorism Studies (involuntarily) reproduces a discourse, led and dictated by mainstream Terrorism Studies, which has made Islam and terrorism stick to each other in dominant imagination, discourse, as well as scholarly work. What I would therefore like to see in the future of CTS is a more radical challenge to TS which would indeed aim to dissociate these two terms from each other. I am not entirely sure how this can be achieved given that the purpose of CTS is to challenge Terrorism Studies which usually necessitates responding to (and thereby involuntarily further normalising) the dominant discourse dictated by Terrorism Studies. With my current work I am just as guilty of this as other CTS scholars, but I am hoping that the future of CTS will involve the carving out of new discourses that are independent from and not a response to (mainstream) Terrorism Studies.

**In a 2021 blog post you argued that in Western modernity, religion is a “feminised category”. Can you tell us more about the impact this has on the way we think about religion?**

I wrote this blog post to serve as a shorter, highly condensed, more easily accessible, and readable version of the article I wrote for *Critical Research on Religion* in 2021. In it I demonstrate how a feminine gender identity is inscribed into the modern category 'religion'. What illustrates this feminisation of religion especially well is the popular 'good religion'/'bad religion' narrative, which is particularly prominent in the discipline of IR and by extension, naturally, Terrorism Studies. This narrative entails a gendered logic which imagines 'good religion' as the 'angel of the house' only concerned with inner spirituality, emotion, affairs of the heart and salvation. Good religion stays in the private sphere (it is also the religion mostly associated with Protestant Christianity). 'Bad religion' on the other hand is the kind of religion that has become 'political' rather than staying in the private sphere. It acts as the 'irrational maniac' threatening to destroy public order and the rational politics of the nation state. It is regularly described as violent, irrational, and its actors as 'fanatic', 'extremist', and 'radical'. 'Political' religion, it seems, is acting against its

## Interview – Rabea M. Khan

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'true' nature. In other words, it is acting against its feminine, peace-loving, private nature and as gender non-conforming by inserting itself into the masculinist, public sphere where it does not belong and where it is therefore the cause of chaos, violence, and disorder. A very similar line of argument has been put forward by earlier theorists, such as Rousseau, Hegel and Freud, about women's innate deficiency and threat to civilisation, rationality and public order if not kept in check and confined to the private sphere (see Pateman 1980). Essentially, then, 'bad religion' is discussed and presented in similar terms as gendered bodies that are seen to act against their 'natural' gender identities.

There is a significant racial dimension to this, of course. 'Bad religion' is more likely to be assigned to and associated with non-Christian religions and religions which are seen as furthest removed from the Christian- and Eurocentric model of 'religion' which Europe, in modernity, has invented. The fact that the modern-colonial concept of religion is feminised in this way, then, has an impact on how we talk about it, what policies we facilitate and restrict, but also which religions (and by extension races we associate with those religions) we discriminate against more than others. It is a fascinating phenomenon we can observe here which has feminised 'religion' more generally as the concept which was invented in Enlightenment, post-Westphalian Europe and which initially was a synonym for Christianity before it was then 'stretched' to also apply to other cultures, belief systems or traditions outside of Europe. This 'stretching' or re-invention of religion as a universal and not just Christian concept, then, had a colonial purpose and served a particular function: assigning 'religion' (the implication here being 'bad religion') to non-Western cultures, peoples, and societies served to feminise them and signal their inferiority and backwardness.

### **You've talked about the limits of feminist theory earlier; can you explain what you mean by this?**

Yes, this is a slightly uncomfortable topic for me to be quite honest. I have found my way into my PhD through feminist theory and I consider myself a feminist scholar, however, I also am very critical of the universalism that dominant (mainstream) feminism often claims for itself. It is also the language of feminism and self-proclaimed feminists which have often done the most harm to women of colour, visibly Muslim women or even just religious women more generally. I speak here as someone who was brought up in a German context and someone who had their earliest encounters with feminists in Germany, experiences which were often alienating and exclusionary. And despite the fact that I consider myself a feminist and I know that feminism can be what I want it to be, it is often a (very tiring) struggle to have to explain, justify and distance your feminism from the dominant, possessive, and appropriating version of white feminism.

In an academic context, one of my personal pet peeves is the overuse, abuse and cooptation of 'intersectionality' which seems to have become the latest buzzword within feminist literature as well as outside of it. This is a concept with origins in Black feminist theory, developed by Black feminists to address the very specific and unique forms of discrimination and racism that Black women face, yet it is now used and co-opted by feminists across disciplines, by theorists as well as activists, often in ways that eventually have the effect of sidelining Black women yet again. As a woman of colour, I encountered several experiences throughout my PhD journey which made me very wary of the universalism which a lot of feminist theory seems to claim for itself either explicitly or more implicitly. It was suggested to me on numerous occasions, that I use the language and/or framework of intersectionality for my work given that I theorise about both race/coloniality and gender in relation to terrorism. I chose not to. It does not appropriately describe my work and as I mentioned earlier it seems disrespectful to the original purpose intersectionality was developed for. Stretching it in ways that make it apply to all kinds of other phenomena, that do not centre Black women anymore, waters down, and often erases the original purpose intersectionality was meant to serve (see Nash 2019; see also Sara Salem and Rekia Jibrin 2015).

Instead, what I see a lot of scholars who claim to be 'intersectional' or use 'intersectionality' do is not actually giving other categories like race or religion its due scholarly attention and scrutiny but claim that it is automatically accounted for because their framework is an intersectional one. This means it is often used as a shield instead of the radical challenge to dominant feminist theory it was originally developed for. Intersectionality, to me, was originally developed to indeed point to the limits of feminist theory. I don't want to perpetuate the misappropriation of intersectionality and see my work as building on Maria Lugones' and Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí's approach to gender as a colonial invention and tool.

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### **What are you currently working on?**

I have a couple of projects at the moment and am hoping that the busy and precarious life of an ECR scholar in this field will actually allow me to work on these in good time. My main priority at the moment is to finish my book proposal for my first manuscript, based on my PhD thesis (“The Gendered Coloniality of the Religious Terrorism Thesis’). I am also working on a couple of articles at the moment, one of which I am co-authoring with my mentor and friend, Jasmine Gani and which we hope to see published soon. This article discusses the often harmful and racist consequences of declaring positionality. This article is very much based on our lived experiences as Muslim women of colour in academia. The paper was both extremely easy and at the same time difficult to write. We first presented this paper at the 2019 Millennium conference and found the support and validation from so many women of colour in the room incredibly motivating, reassuring, and healing.

I am also currently working on a project led by Lisa Stampnitzky and Michael Livesey on the “Roots of ‘Terrorism’ in Time and Space”, for which I will be contributing a piece on the colonial foundations of contemporary counter-terrorism strategies. Lastly, I have already pointed to the gap between Critical Religion and IR in my work, and this is something I look forward to developing as a wider research agenda.

### **What is the most important advice you could give to other early career or young scholars?**

1) Keep a PhD diary 2) Take all the advice you can get but also feel free to ignore any advice you get, especially when it puts you under more pressure! And of course: trust yourself! I was very lucky to get good advice throughout my PhD journey but also had to learn not to feel like I need to follow all advice I get. You learn and develop a pretty good gut feeling down the line and need to learn to trust yourself in your decisions. You will get a lot of advice on what you should do and what would look good on your CV or will serve job prospects, however, it is impossible to do it all and sometimes it is more important to just go at your own pace and stay within your comfort zone. You don’t need to attend every conference, go to every talk, or finish your PhD in three years.

Another piece of valuable advice which I got from my friend and mentor at St Andrews, Faye Donnelly, after I had passed my viva last year was to reflect on the seeds I wanted to plant moving forward, both professionally and personally. It helped to sit down after my viva, open up my PhD diary and jot down a couple of sentences on how I want to carry out my next steps, and what impact I hope to make, however small.

I am very much guided by my faith with my work in academia – to make a contribution that is useful to others as well as my community. I want to make knowledge accessible and to challenge dominant and harmful discourses which are normalised and made to appear like common sense. If that is through my students who benefit from my teaching or anyone else who can take any kind of insight from my work, then I have achieved my mission – because this is what I am on – a mission.

So, to sum this up – trust your gut feeling, don’t lose sight of why you are doing what you’re doing, find purpose, re-align your purpose where necessary, and learn to ignore advice that doesn’t feel useful to you at the time.