

Unfinished Stories

Tribute to a great teacher

Keywords: Islamophobia as a form of racism; toxic religion and healthy religion; the 7/7 bombs in London, 2005; Mullah Nasruddin; British Islam.



I first met Fuad Nahdi (1957–2020) in the mid-1990s. Our paths crossed partly because our respective working lives overlapped in various ways, and partly because our respective families and childcare duties took us sometimes to the same gatherings and settings.

My own work in those days was focused by the Runnymede Trust commissions on Islamophobia and multi-ethnic Britain, and by unsuccessful lobbying of parliament to amend race relations legislation so that it took on board the concept of ethno-religious identity, and saw and treated sectarianism and religious intolerance as forms of racism. Fuad, for his part, as I saw him, was exasperated by patriarchy and religious quietism in certain areas and strands of British Islam, and by anti-Muslim hatred and phobia in British society, culture, law and politics. He contended that Islamophobia was also endemic in what was sometimes called in those days the race relations industry, for example the Commission for Racial Equality and other such bodies, endeavours and projects.

(‘Where’s the Muslim,’ demanded a headline in 1999 in *Q News*, founded and edited by Fuad, ‘in Macpherson’s black and white Britain?’)

Our respective family lives touched and overlapped with each other because Fuad’s daughter and my grandson were in the same classrooms at Mount Stewart Primary School in North Wembley, and he and I would sometimes gravitate towards each other at the school gates when we were both there to collect our little ones from the rigours of a day’s

primary education. He and I tended to stand slightly apart from the other parents and grandparents, and from various *au pairs* and childminders, so that our conversations could not be overheard – for topics we used to touch on, inevitably if implicitly, included the iniquities of churches, priests, mosques and imams, and the differences and distinctions between toxic religion and healthy religion, between spirituality and faith, and between true dialogue and casual chat. Prima facie, these are not topics for urgent consideration at a primary school's gates on a typical afternoon.

Our lives continued to intertwine and overlap during the next 20 years. All three of my grandchildren attended faithfully the supplementary Muslim school led in Wembley on Sundays by Humera and Khalida Khan; my daughter and her husband had frequent contact with Humera (Fuad's wife) and Fuad himself; and their children and my grandchildren grew up alongside each other. I was in due course influenced and inspired by the work and achievements of the Radical Middle Way and An-Nisa Society and by Fuad's and Humera's writings, lectures, speeches and presentations.

As I look back now on Fuad's life and work as a whole I remember in particular two stories he told about Mullah Nasruddin. One was at the time of the London bombings in summer 2005. The other was at a memorial event organised and chaired by Fuad in 2006 for a great Islamic scholar who had recently died, Zaki Badawi.

'What happened?', 'What changed?', 'What now?'

Of the bombs in 2005 Fuad asked three general questions:

'What happened?', 'What changed?', 'What now?' And two specific questions: 'Is Islam in Britain failing its younger generation?' and 'Is British society failing its Muslim community?' As a prelude to debate and deliberation around these questions Fuad recalled the day Mullah Nasruddin wanted to learn how to play the guitar. He went to a teacher who told him it's very easy, but you have to pay twenty dollars for the first lesson, which is introductory, but then only five dollars for each of the other lessons. Nasruddin thought about this and then said 'OK, but I'd like to leave out the first lesson and start with the second.'

All too much of the debate around the 7/7 bombings, Fuad emphasised, particularly the debate initiated by the government and developed by journalists, was about the second and subsequent lessons that had to be learned, not about the first. The first lesson would have included references to imperialism, conquest, orientalism and liberation over many centuries; the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916; the Balfour Declaration and the Nakba; the jihad in Afghanistan; the Zia regime in Pakistan;

Kashmir; oil and the New American Century; patterns of migration and ensuing social alienation; theological and doctrinal debates within Islam, both in Britain and globally; inter-generational strains in migrant and diaspora communities; and cohesion, pluralism and living together (*vivre ensemble*).

Don't ask me, ask the donkey

Once upon a time, so Fuad said, Nasruddin happened to be riding his little grey donkey along the North Circular Road in London. There was a sudden loud bang when a car's exhaust exploded and the donkey, terrified out of its wits, started galloping as fast as its hooves would carry it. Nasruddin clung on for dear life. 'Mullah, mullah,' onlookers called out in dismay and alarm as the donkey careered madly onwards, 'where are you going?' 'Don't ask me,' gasped Nasruddin. 'Ask the donkey.'

Great teachers are often and rightly more concerned with the messy chaos and bewilderment of the here-and-now than with the tidiness of destinations, ends and goals; with puzzles and mysteries more than certainties; paradox and metaphor more than prosaic literalism; laughter, merriment and delight more than gravitas and solemnity; mischief, play and jests more than reason and science; and unfinished stories more than order and precision..

A great human being

Fuad Nahdi was, yes, a great teacher. And also, therefore, a great human being. It was a great honour to know him and I have in consequence great sympathy for his closest colleagues, co-workers and friends in their loss, and of course for Humera, Nadir and Ilyeh. I have no doubt they will keep Fuad's legacy safe and vibrant and full of positive impact, and will develop and unfold it further.

Robin Richardson

SOURCE

This tribute was included in a special issue of *Q-News—The Muslim Magazine*, celebrating the life, impact and legacy of its founding editor and publisher, Fuad Nahdi. Coming 29 years after the magazine's first issue, and a year after Fuad's passing, the special issue was compiled by Shagufta Yaqub and Fareena Alam, two of the magazine's former editors.

There is fuller information at <https://www.blurb.com/b/11068426-q-news-in-memory-of-fuad-nahdi>