

## **'Islam against Religious Extremism and Fanaticism' - speech delivered by Imam Abdul Jalil Sajid at a meeting on International NGO Rights and Humanity Islam against Religious Extremism and Fanaticism.**

I am honoured to speak to you this evening on the very important topic promoting respect for human rights and global ethics in the response to recent acts of terrorism especially to give my views on Religious Extremism and Fanaticism. From the very outset I wish to give my personal and on behalf of the Muslim Council of Britain's congratulations to your organisation Rights and Humanity for its fifteenth birthday and very valuable work it has done which has been very much recognised by international agencies. I have privileged to work closely on last year UN World Conference on Race and found Rights and Humanity work with faith communities very useful. Today 10th December date is also very special date in International calendar. Today is the 53rd anniversary of United Nations Declaration of Human Rights when in 1948 World community endorsed a remarkable document.

Let me say a few words about Human Rights and Islam before I turn to the topic of religious extremism and fanaticism. I must make it clear that to the best of my knowledge, the modern world had no concept of human rights before the seventh century and it was until 18th century that the concept took any practical meaning in the constitutions of a number of countries. From Islamic point of view God granted rights to all humans, which cannot be taken away by any human institutions. Islam gave to mankind two types ideal code of rights fifteen hundred years ago: 1. Haqooq Allah which means rights and obligations towards the creator and 2. Haqooq an-Nas or Haqooq al-Ibad which means human rights. The first constitutes recognition of duties by human beings to be righteous and act with purity of mind and body in worship and obedience to the will of creator. The second is based upon social contract to do good deeds for common good with dignity and respect for all human beings while appreciating diversity and valuing the difference. This is the obligation of the society for the best relationship between man to man. Every right have some duties and responsibilities, which must be strictly observed, in letter and in spirit.

The fact is that from the very beginning included human rights among its basic tenets, along with its great emphasis on duties of man towards fellow human beings. It is because of this that we find in various places in Qur'an revealed in early period condemning various forms of violations of human rights, which prevailed in those days. It motivated the people to change some undesirable customs of that time such as killing girl child, established system of slavery or non-equal treatment between various sections of the community. The Prophet Muhammad paid great attention to the basic human rights from the early days of his prophethood. The Prophet of Islam's famous sermon given at the Hujjatul Wida (farewell Pilgrimage) is just one example of Islamic charter of human rights. Human rights in Islam are an integral part of the overall Islamic order and it is obligation on all. These rights are conferred by God have been explained in various authoritative books on Islam written by scholars. It is unfortunate that human rights are being trampled upon with impunity in many countries of the world including some Muslim countries. Such violations are a matter of serious concern and are arousing the conscience of many people throughout the world. Let me now turn towards the topic I was asked to give my views.

### Condemnation of 11th September 2001 Atrocities

I watched with shock and horror the tragic events unfolding in America on Tuesday the 11th September 2001. It was unbelievable to witness such a dreadful, wanton evil act of senseless murder. The killing of innocent people cannot be justified. I condemned this crime against humanity and offered my sympathies on behalf of the Muslim community to families of those who lost or injured their beloved due to these atrocities. I personally know that many Muslims have been killed in this tragedy. I believe that whoever is responsible of these atrocities, regardless of their religious, ethnic, racial, cultural or political beliefs must be brought to justice, as terror has no religion. In my opinion these attacks are attacks on Islamic values. The name of Islam has been dishonoured. Islam has been hijacked and Muslims all over the world are now facing the consequences.

Let me begin from the very outset to clarify Islam from Muslim. In my opinion the word "Islam" should be used exclusively for the "Divine way of Life" based upon its divine sources the Qur'an, "the word of God" and Sunnah, "the proven practices of the Holy Prophet" (peace and blessing of God be upon him) while "Muslims", live as human beings are free to abide or deviate from Divine Guidance as they may feel fit according to their own conscience. Islam never claimed to be a new faith.

### Religious Extremism:

Islam is religion of moderation. Holy Qur'an defines Muslims as the well -balanced middle nation model for others (2:143) and advised them not to follow extremism in religious interpretation (4:171, 5:77, 22:78). The Holy Prophet warned Muslims: "Beware of Extremism in your religion as people before you were destroyed themselves because of their extremism", "Do not be hard upon yourself in your opinion in the matter of faith", "

Always choose easy way in your religious way on matters of faith. Certainly religion is easy" (Collection of sayings of the Holy Prophet by Ahmed, Nisai, Al-Hakim and Ibn Maja). In my humble opinion Islam believes in a civil Society based on rule of law, anyone who creates chaos (Fitna or Fasad) in the society through terror can be treated as harabi (waging war against the society) and should be brought to justice accordingly by legal process. Islam and terrorism are contradictory terms opposed to each other. Islam condemns and rejects all forms of terror, killing without due process of law, injustice, corruption, tyranny and oppression. There is no justification for the usage of terms such as 'Islamic terrorists'.

One of the distinctive features of the present world is the overwhelming presence of violence in our societies. The nature of indiscriminate and senseless violence is considered one of the prime threats to the world peace and security. The modern age has developed ingenious ways of inflicting violence upon people. I must make it clear that Islam upholds sanctity of human life as paramount, as the Holy Quran declares that killing one innocent human being is like killing the entire human race (5:32, 6:151, 17:33), like other faiths. Islam considers human life as sacred as the first and foremost basic right of a human being given by God is the right to live in peace and tranquillity. However, taking a criminal's life by the state in order to administer justice is allowed in Islam as it upholds the rule of law, and helps maintain peace and security in the society. Only a proper and competent authority (i.e court of law) can decide whether an individual has forfeited his right to life by disregarding the right to life and peace of other human beings. The accused must be given full facilities under the law 'the right of defence'. Extra judicial killings are strictly prohibited in Islam.

Suicide killing:

Killing one's own self (suicide) is prohibited in Islam (4:29), as it is an abuse of the Divine gift of Life. According to Islamic Law those who commit or try to commit suicide are committing a major sin and will be sent to the fire of hell. Even patients who are in severe pain are prohibited to wish death. Holy Prophet said: "Do not harm yourself or injure others".

Religious Fanaticism First of all, what is fanaticism? It is a much used and abused term, not merely by contemporary writers and speakers. The exploitation of this term rather goes back deep into history. It has been not only used to silence opponents but also has been used to dub different religious as protagonists of violence. It is one of those terms that have always been used by different groups of people to suit their ends.

There are three basic points that are to be kept in view. Firstly, I would treat as a fanatic one who is not open to reason, who is not prepared to think and argue, who instead of the logic of argument would employ the arbitrary use of authority. Secondly, the problem of violence is very central to what fanaticism is. Using the means, methods and techniques that create disorder, disaffection and violence can be called an integral part of the fanaticism. Mere use of force is not violence. Even a policeman uses force but this is not violence unless he transgresses certain limits. That brings me to my third point. Very fundamental to fanaticism is the violating of those values, which have been accepted by humanity as its fundamental code of behaviour - respecting the difference, the rule of law, principles of natural and social justice.

Double standards

To stand for one's conviction is not fanaticism. To believe in certain values, to live for them, to work for them, to strive for them is not fanaticism. We are living in a strange world of double standards, 'double thought' and 'double talk'. If a Muslim works for Islam this is fanaticism. If a democrat goes to the extent of saying, as not one but many intellectuals have said, that those who want to change the democratic system through democratic means are rebels this is not considered fanaticism?

When in Kenya, through the process of direct election, a parliament came to power which was alleged to be communistic, no one but Bertrand Russell comes forward to say that we cannot accept a democratic vote against democracy. And this is not fanaticism? In this age of double talk and double thinking, to stand for one's ideals, to believe in them to have the force of conviction is not fanaticism. Tolerance is a great cultural but it is not an absolute value. You do not tolerate the person who uses violence to meet his ends. You do not tolerate in any way someone who infringes your law, who acts against decency and the norms of society. Tolerance must have its limits. And this is what distinguishes idealism from fanaticism.

Idealism and Fanaticism confused

Conviction and bigotry is not the same thing. A man with a conviction also believes, but he believes on the basis of reason and argument and he is prepared to argue out his case. A bigot is not prepared to listen to anything that goes against his views.

It is unfortunate that some writers and even top scholars have been in the habit of confusing these two and they have been calling our idealism, fanaticism, and calling the word fanaticism, idealism. Many writers have been accusing Islam of being fanatic, or being intolerant, of being a religion propagated by the sword and so on. The fact is that the history of inquisitions of the last centuries shows that hundreds of thousands of people were prosecuted simply for holding opinions that did not conform to the view of the religious authorities. Jews suffered for simply being Jews in the last century. I do not believe that any religious teachings teach hatred or violence.

#### A different outlook

In Islamic history you will find an outlook of a different nature. When the Romans conquered any country, the first thing they would do is mass massacre. When the Muslims entered any country, they would give guarantees of life, property and honour to all the non-belligerents. Even in war a Muslim is not allowed to kill an old person, a woman, and a child, those who are crippled or disabled. Not only that, even trees are not to be cut and crops are not to be burnt. The entire Islamic history does not know of the concept of mass massacre.

I draw your attention to look to the actions of the Holy Prophet of Islam when he entered Makkah as victor. Everyone was offered complete amnesty. When Caliph Umar entered Jerusalem he was not even prepared to pray in a Church for fear that those who came after him may treat the place as a mosque and take it away from the Christians. But when the Crusaders there took the city of Jerusalem was total massacre of the population. What happened in Spain? Not a single Muslim or Jew was left unexecuted or un-exiled. It was the same in Sicily where all the mosques were demolished. Even in the last century the same practice was adopted in Bosnia, Kosovo and Chechnya and many other parts of the world. There is also the example of Greece where the entire Muslim population was either eliminated or driven out, and in parts of the Balkans where Muslims were in a clear majority, not only their position of power was annulled; in some cases their physical existence was not tolerated.

Throughout the entire history of Islam you cannot find one single example of any Inquisition or mass murder or massacre. And may I add that if there had been any instance of law suppression or doing injustice in Muslim history, this had arisen from those who believed in so called liberalism or modernism and the object of oppression had been those who stood for the orthodox, pristine, unadulterated and unchanged teachings of Islam. The examples can be multiplied beyond number. The entire study of T. W. Arnold on "The Preaching of Islam" is a document from one of the leading orientalisists saying that Muslims definitely have certain commitments.

#### Diversity recognised, appreciated and celebrated

Islam presents the concept that all human beings are equal and we are equal because we are all creatures of God with no distinctions of colour, race or country, or tribe or clan or anything else. One would find that fanaticism is generated in the last analysis either from any of these false prejudices, when you try to group humanity into certain watertight compartments. One cannot change the colour of his skin; one cannot change his place of birth. If one believes in any of these standards, then rational fusion of the human race is not possible and you become intolerant towards others.

In Islam, the rational fusion is possible for whatever tribe you come from, from whatever race you come, whatever colour you may have, whatever territory you might be born in, whatever language you speak, you are one, you can be one. You belong to one race the human race, the one family the human family. You belong to one brotherhood. Diversity among fellow human beings must be recognised, appreciated and valued in all aspects of life. The majority community is always judged the way it treats its minority community.

#### Ends cannot justify means

Another point is that Islam is very unique and firm in asserting that the ends cannot justify the means. A source from where fanaticism and intolerance have most often come is the mistaken belief that ends justify means. This means that to achieve even good ends you could resort to evil means. The principle that Islam has enunciated is that :

"Good and bad are not equal. Replace evil by good". (Holy Qur'an 41:34)

If you fight falsehood with falsehood it is falsehood that prevails. If you replace vice with vice, it is vice which triumphs. If you change evil by evil, it is evil which is victorious. Islam says that evil is to be eliminated by good. If you pursue this technique then only you would be able to fill the earth with goodness, and justice, and peace and fellow feeling. Islam has struck at the roots of fanaticism. If you reflect upon the system that Islam has given, you would find that fanaticism has no place in it but idealism is the lifeblood of it. In the Qur'an it has been mentioned that the mission for which this Muslim nation has been created is that you call people to goodness. As far as the

wrong (munkar) is concerned, you are permitted to eliminate it. But as far as the truth and virtue (ma'ruf) is concerned, it is not to be enforced by power.

You can very easily see that Islam has clearly discriminated between idealism and fanaticism. It has done everything to generate in us real idealism, noble idealism, virtuous idealism, and to protect us from the evil influences of fanaticism. The Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) has said that Islam is a religion of the middle path.

The Qur'an has called the Muslim nation 'Ummat al-Wusta', the people of the middle and model nation, the people who maintain balance and equilibrium in all their affairs. Adhering to idealism, protecting and avoiding the extremes of fanaticism - this is the middle path and it is this path which Islam invites to all humanity. Through Education, diplomacy, Dialogue and firmness Muslims are urged to deal with extremism and fanaticism in the world.

#### Roots of Extremism and Fanaticism.

There are Muslims who claim to be religious but try to impose their views over others by force or violence. They forget that Islamic teaching advocates the fundamental principle to respect for individual freedom of conscience and belief. Islam believes that freedom of belief is a basic God given right to all human beings. Extremism and Fanaticism is alien to Islam. However there are a few verses of the Holy Quran, which have been interpreted in such a way that some Muslim may take a view to impose their views over others. For example The Holy Quran commands Muslim to live and rule their lives according to the revealed message of God. If any Muslim does not decide according to the Holy Quran then he is not only wrongdoer, a rebel, disobedient but a non-believer also (5:44- 47). These verses were interpreted by some that if a Muslim ruler has completely abandon the Islamic Law then it is legitimate to disobey him and change him by force. They also believe that, as Islam does not make any distinction between communities of believers and the Islamic State - because the State is simply a political arm to establish common good, it is important that Islamic Law must be established within Islamic societies. Due to their political ends they establish effective ways to promote their views by every means available to them.

In my opinion, fanaticism, terrorism and extremism are symptom of a problem, not the actual cause. In order to combat and eradicate these evils totally our long-term goal should be to eliminate the underlying social and political causes which breed them. Paralleling our actions against terrorism, we must have equally vigorous efforts to enhance freedom, human dignity, justice and humanitarian values. Some of the possible factors behind the violent terrorists acts may include:

- 1) Hatred and prejudice
- 2) Fear and powerlessness
- 3) Occupation and domination
- 4) Injustice and suffering
- 5) Corruption and greed
- 6) Oppression and Control
- 7) Dictatorship and total authority
- 8) Debt, poverty and hunger
- 9) Frustration and helplessness
- 10) Dislike of inclusive Society

There is a new type of terrorism, which has emerged recently in the forms of arson, bombing and sabotage in the name of saving the environment, ecology and animal and zoological kingdom. Racism (colour or cultural), anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Xenophobia, bigotry must be in words and deeds. I am glad to note that from the very beginning the British Prime Minister together with the American President made it clear that Islam and the Muslim Community are not to blame for the tragedy. We are dealing with fanatic individuals who have behaved in this most abhorrent and abominable manner. This is not a crusade or conflict between Islam and the West. Rt Hon Tony Blair said: "Blaming Islam is as ludicrous as blaming Christianity for loyalist attack on Catholics or nationalists attack on Protestants in Northern Ireland".

After 11th September 2001, the wave of anti-Muslim prejudice and attacks on British and American Muslims was more than doubled in Britain during the Gulf War in 1991. British Muslims from all backgrounds were threatened day and night, and suffered an acute sense of vulnerability in their homes and mosques, as well as on the streets. Several Muslims were killed in retaliation. A number of mosques endured arson attacks. To address the issue of Islamophobia, the American Congress passed laws providing further protection against anti-Arab and anti-Muslim hostility. As British Muslims have no protection under the present British Race Laws any recourse to British criminal justice system would be appropriate. I think that United Kingdom must outlaw Religious Discrimination and enact laws against the incitement of religious hatred and vilification of religious sanctities. It is important to amend the present Public Order, Crime and Disorder, Human Right and Race Relation current

legislations urgently to protect many innocent lives. This would be an act to address Extremism and fanaticism from our Multi-ethnic, Multi racial and Multi-faith British Society in 21st Century.

Terrorism, in fact, spans vast aspects covering the entire world, and manifests itself in various forms and shapes. Its perpetrators do not fit any stereotype. Terrorists are using new technologies and have set their sights on new targets. Those who have no respect for human life and have the power to expand human lives are not following the Islamic norms and values. Sometimes the religion of Islam is held responsible for the acts of a handful Muslims who are associated with acts of destruction and terror. Islam whose name means peace cannot encourage its adherents to work for death and destruction. It is an irony of our time that the light of Islamic learning, which brought an end to the dark ages of the West, is now being seen as responsible for the advent of an age of terror. Islam is peace not terror.

Imam Dr Abduljalil Sajid

Chairman of Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) Social Policy, Welfare and Regeneration Committee