

'Muslims and Islam in Europe ' The integration of a religious minority Bruhl, Germany.

Muslim perspectives in a secular state - the discussion in the United Kingdom.

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Thank you for giving me the chance to come to Germany in order to learn from you and share with you our experiences in the United Kingdom.

Let me start with a few introductory remarks about the role of the Muslim Council of Britain and about Islam in the UK.

The Muslim Council of Britain is a national umbrella organisation that serves and represents British Muslims. It is not the only organisation fulfilling that role, but one of a number. However, the MCB's position is rather different from the others' for two main reasons. Firstly, with over 300 organisations affiliated to it, the MCB is the largest representative organisation. Secondly, the MCB is democratically constituted. Its senior leaders and the executive are elected and serve fixed terms and we remain accountable to our membership throughout. As a result, the MCB is arguably Britain's most prominent Muslim representative organisation.

Although our main concern is the welfare of British Muslims, we believe this must be sought by serving and sharing in the common good of our society as a whole. We are concerned therefore for the welfare of all Britons - whatever their faith or of no faith. Our modus operandi can be summed up in the phrase 'constructive engagement'. We believe we achieve more by participating in wider society, in playing an active part as responsible and concerned citizens than we can by standing apart. Moreover, we view this as a religious and social duty.

Although Muslims have had a presence in the UK for around four hundred years, it is only in the last half century that Muslims have settled in large numbers and put down permanent roots. Today there are around one and a half to two million Muslims in the UK. We won't know for sure until the latest census results are published later this year. Two-thirds of British Muslims originate from the Indian sub-continent. The rest comprise people of African, Arab, Turkish and increasingly European and specifically Balkan origin. To this list we must of course add increasing numbers converts - both black and white Britons.

As I flew out yesterday there was intense press speculation as to whom the new Archbishop of Canterbury - the head of the Church of England would be. What's more interesting from our perspective today is perhaps not so much the decision itself, but the process. It is in the gift of the Prime Minister Tony Blair to appoint the new Archbishop. This is done in consultation with the Queen who, as head of state also carries the title of Supreme Governor of the Church of England. In a year in which we in the UK celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee it is worth remembering that it is the Archbishop of Canterbury who conducts the coronation ceremony. It is he who, in a literal sense, crowns the new monarch.

All this serves as a vivid demonstration of the fact that the UK isn't quite a secular state. At least not in the conventional sense. The Church of England is the established church and its Bishops sit in the House of Lords. School children must attend religious assemblies. But the UK is certainly not a religious state. So a sharp dichotomy between the religious and the secular isn't appropriate for the UK; nor I suspect, for many Western European countries. Religion is deeply rooted here in German society for example. And the greatest irony is perhaps that for the majority of German Muslims who come from Turkey, Germany is perhaps constitutionally less secular than Turkey and more tolerant of religious practices.

It's more appropriate therefore, to think of the UK as a multi-faith, multi-cultural society. One in which secularism can be counted as an article of faith for some.

In the UK integration has recently been the focus of much debate. Although this has covered immigrants and asylum seekers in general, a lot of the attention has been on Muslims. And much of that has been reactive. Indeed, in my view discussion of Muslim integration in the UK has been shaped by three critical events. They are the Satanic Verses affair more than a decade ago, the disturbances we experienced last summer in some of our northern towns - Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, and finally the terrorist atrocities of September 11 and its aftermath. Each of these crises brought to sharp focus seemingly conflicting values, beliefs and practices separating Muslims and the wider British public. In particular press reports about British Muslims fighting with the

Taliban against British troops caused outrage and consternation. These later turned out to be greatly exaggerated - confined to a tiny handful of extremists who based their actions on a deeply flawed interpretation of Islam.

In each of the three instances I have highlighted it is arguable whether integration - or the lack of it - is the primary cause or indeed in itself a sufficient solution. The disturbances last summer for instance had more to do with poverty, discrimination and racism than religious and cultural integration. However, we can agree that integration is by and large a positive phenomenon that can help foster cohesive societies and therefore it is something we should strive for.

So how does the Islamic Charta's approach to integration look from a UK perspective? Well, one way of looking at the Charta is to divide the issues it addresses into two mutually dependent categories. The first category consists of what I shall call essential building-blocks - institutions and services that are vital to a Muslim's way of life. This includes mosques, the availability of halal meat, respect for Islamic dress, the provision of burial places and so on. Once most of these basic needs are catered for it becomes easier to address the second category, which consists of the more advanced topics. This includes initiatives that advance understanding, dialogue, co-existence and of course, integration. Most of the issues covered in the Charta therefore would be familiar territory for a British Muslim.

There are of course significant differences in the manner in which integration has been pursued in the UK. I do not think I would be too far off the mark by suggesting that the processes of integration are more advanced in the UK compared with the rest of the European continent. This is due largely to four key elements that have together helped integration.

The first concerns the essentials - we are back to the essential building-blocks I mentioned earlier when discussing the Charta. By and large British Muslims have reasonable access to vital institutions and services such as mosques and halal food outlets. There is in principle no barrier to religious practice - including the right to wear the hijab. And in core state services ranging from hospitals to prisons religious needs of Muslims are also catered for.

The second key element is the strong culture of civil society Muslims have developed over the years. There are Muslim newspapers - the Muslim News for example is the most widely read Muslim newspaper whilst there a number of other titles too; Muslim social clubs, representative organisations, pressure groups, voluntary organisations on so on - catering for both material and spiritual needs of Muslims. Apart from institutions there are many networks of volunteers giving up their time to advance good causes, whether helping school children with their homework or providing mentoring roles for young people about to enter the job market. This rich social network that is sustained largely through voluntary efforts and donations is coupled with a culture of self-help that assists in building and maintaining strong and vibrant communities and extends opportunities.

The third key element strikes at the heart of one of the main differences between the UK and Germany. The vast majority of British Muslims are not simply residents, but citizens. The implications of this go beyond the legal and political rights citizenship confers. It means Muslims belong in Britain - Britain is their home. The legal and political rights remain important. As voters Muslims can expect the attention of politicians - at least during election time. And although much remains to be done, there have recently been some positive developments. Since the Labour government came to power in 1997 we have seen the first Muslim MPs in the House of Commons - two at present. There is also one Muslim MEP - a Conservative. In addition there are now a handful of Muslim Peers appointed to the House of Lords. And of course, Muslims have a long history of serving as councillors in local authorities across the country.

Not only are there Muslim voices in local and national decision making bodies, government and opposition parties are also in frequent contact with Muslim organisations, soliciting our views on a whole range of issues. In the run-up to the last general election the MCB published Electing to Listen - a policy document setting out the issues of concern to Muslim voters. The document was received with interest by all the major political parties and formed the basis of roundtable discussions shortly afterwards. This is just one of the many instances that exemplifies the engagement of Muslims with the mainstream of British society.

Finally, there are also cultural factors that help integration. There are a number of high-profile Muslim role models people can be inspired by. These include Yusuf Islam - the former pop star Cat Stevens, Shami Ahmed the owner of Joe Bloggs - a mainstream fashion label and various sports personalities including Prince Naseem Hamed the boxer, and Nasser Hussain, the England cricket captain. The media too surprise us every now and then with their fair and balanced reporting. Both the BBC and the Guardian newspaper - the leading centre left broadsheet in the UK - have each recently devoted series on Muslims that portray rounded picture of the community - highlighting many of the positive aspects of being Muslim, as well the many obstacles Muslims face which put them at a disadvantage compared with the rest of society.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. But what it does do is hopefully provide an overview of the reasons why integration in the UK has been relatively successful (I stress the relative as opposed to the absolute).

However, this does not mean that all is perfect within the British Isles. There remain significant obstacles to better integration. Let me highlight four in particular.

The first is the absence of one important right - the right not to be discriminated against on the basis of faith. Religious discrimination has been one of the most important issues Muslims have been campaigning on for decades now. My colleague AbdulAziz from the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism will speak specifically about this topic later, so I will not go into any detail. Suffice to say that although racial discrimination is illegal, discrimination on religious grounds is not. As a result there are many instances where Muslims are the target of hate crime specifically because of their faith and Muslim women have been denied jobs because they wear the hijab. Jews and Sikhs for instances are protected because they are classified as ethnic groups, but others, such as Muslims and Hindus are not.

The second obstacle is the high level of poverty and social exclusion amongst some sections of the Muslim community. Pakistanis and Bangladeshis - who are predominantly Muslim - are amongst the most disadvantaged communities in Britain. Three quarters of children from this community are living in households that are below the poverty threshold compared with a third of children for the population as a whole. Unemployment amongst Pakistani and Bangladeshi Muslims is around twice the rate for the population as a whole. This coupled with poor educational outcomes, bad housing and ill health builds up a picture of despair. Poverty and social exclusion wastes talent and stifles potential. In the worst instances when this is coupled with racist agitation by fascists, anger can erupt into violence - as seen during the disturbances last year. Integration here means eradicating poverty.

Earlier I highlighted the positive role played by the media in promoting integration. Sadly this is all too often the exception that proves the rule. These and other instances of good practice notwithstanding, the media have some way to go before they become more of an enabler than a barrier to integration. In its daily coverage of Islam and Muslims the media still gets it spectacularly wrong. Whether it is ignorance that generates inaccurate stories, bias that colours their commentary or a blind pursuit of sensational headlines that leads the media to give disproportionate publicity to extremists; the media must do more to report on Islam in a fair, responsible, accurate and balanced manner.

The final obstacle is international affairs. Whilst the main focus of organisations like the MCB is domestic affairs, world events do impact locally. Global injustice is an issue that troubles all Muslims. Muslims are fully aware of the suffering endured by their brethren - innocent civilians like themselves - in countries like Palestine, Iraq, Kashmir and Chechnya. Images of homes flattened under the might of Israeli tanks and warplanes in Jenin, Ramallah and elsewhere in Palestine - blatant acts of injustice - fuels anger. They also starkly demonstrate the hypocrisy of many Western powers whose selective application of UN resolutions accentuates the suffering of ordinary people. Muslims will never feel at ease in any society until this problem is addressed. There must in particular be a just resolution to the Palestinian issue that results in the creation of a viable Palestinian state. This is not an issue for Muslims alone, but for all people of conscience.

So, where do we go from here? Given mutual dependency of Muslims and non-Muslims, any efforts at advancing integration must be shared by all. But Muslims and non-Muslims bear particular responsibilities.

The main challenge for the Muslim community is to be proactive and more diligent in living up to the standards set by their faith. This means addressing areas where practice falls short of what is required. For instances in cases where women are not accorded their due rights because of cultural reasons that are contrary to religious teachings; in publicly opposing extremists who deliberately distort the message of Islam; in doing more to ensure Imams understand western society and are from the west; in promoting democracy and tolerance and in undertaking more initiatives that promote understanding, dialogue and co-operation with society at large.

The challenge for non-Muslim communities is to enable Muslims to feel at home in Britain. This entails showing understanding and tolerance of differences; appreciating the many positive contributions Islam and Muslims have made to Europe in general and British society in particular; recognise that extremists speak only for themselves - not for the vast majority of the Muslim community; and appreciate that in an increasingly smaller world we live with multiple identities which make us richer and more interesting people as a result.

The progress of integration in the UK therefore has largely developed organically. We have not in the UK gone down the path of pronouncing our allegiance or our values in a written document. Our approach is similar to that adopted in the English constitution - which is unwritten. We prefer the flexibility that gives us to adapt in an ever changing world.

At the risk of sounding a bit negative I would put forward three specific concerns I have about a written Charta.

Citizenship and integration are not simply matters that can be expressed legalistically. There is an emotional component that is very real and very strong. Citizenship is about belonging, about feeling British or German, over and above what ones passport issuing country is. Let me borrow an example of the recent football world cup to illustrate my point. Some of you might be aware that both the UK flag - the union jack - and the flag of England have long been associated with the extreme right. They had in effect been hijacked by fascists to the extent that public displays of the flag always made non-White Britons anxious. But during the world cup people spontaneously decided that the flag was theirs - for everyone. So whilst one could not pass a pub, a taxi or a white van that did not parade a multitude to flags displaying their support for the England football team, this practice was no longer confined to white people only. Britons of all colours embraced the flag in an unprecedented manner and cheered on the England team as one nation. Some Muslims even prayed for the England team at their local mosque! No one predicted this spontaneous outpouring of national pride, nor could they explain it. This emotional attachment to the country, displayed through one of its primary symbols, is not something that any written document can capture or encourage. It must come freely and it must be innate. It is a product of the human free spirit.

Another reason why the Charta would probably not find a UK equivalent is because British Muslims believe that we already belong. We are British and we see no need to explain or justify our nationality or our religion. One can I think view the Charta - at least in part - as a defensive exercise. One that puts the Muslim community on a back foot where they seek to reassure the rest of German society. It is almost as if their existence - their beliefs and practices - need justification and acceptance. Of course, citizenship status will have a lot to do with this.

Finally, one has to wonder whether the time and effort involved in securing agreement over the Charta can be expended in better ways. It is almost inevitable that an undertaking of this kind is going to be riddled with differences - both of substance and presentation and that the best one can hope for is broad agreement, not consensus. Sadly our attention will often focus on these differences rather than on the areas of agreement. Perhaps all the time, effort and creative energy can be put to better use in initiatives that practically demonstrate to the German public the message the Charta is trying to convey. Certainly there might be better way of achieving the same ends than through the Charta.

I have presented you a British Muslim perspective. The approach adopted in Germany is different. But the Charta may be what is needed in German society. So whilst this is not a path we in the UK have travelled down, I wish you all the very best in this ambitious project and extend to you any help and assistance that we might be able to offer you along the way.

Thank you all very much.