

Interfaith Work: Bridge Building Among Communities

Speech by Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari, SG MCB

4th December 2006, Derby

Assalamu Alaykum,

I greet you with the Muslim greeting of Peace Be Upon You.

I would like to begin by recounting a story from history, of one Jafar ibn Abi Talib who with his wife was among the first people to accept Islam.

The Quraysh tribe made life intolerable for them both and for their brethren in faith. They tried to obstruct them from observing or performing the duties and rites of Islam. They prevented them from tasting the full sweetness of worship undisturbed. The Quraysh waylaid them at every turn and severely restricted their freedom of movement. To seek refuge, a group left Makkah bound for Abyssinia under the care and protection of the Negus, the just and righteous ruler of Abyssinia, a devout Christian. For the first time since they had become Muslims, they savoured the taste of freedom and security and enjoyed the sweetness of worship undisturbed.

In Abyssinia, two Qurayshi emissaries were sent to secure their extradition, saying to the Negus: "O King, there is a group of evil persons from among our youth who have escaped to your kingdom. They practice a religion which neither we nor you know. They have forsaken our religion and have not entered into your religion. The respected leaders of their people - from among their own parents and uncles and from their own clans - have sent us to you to request you to return them. They know best what trouble they have caused."

The Negus looked towards his bishops who said: "They speak the truth, O King. Their own people know them better and are better acquainted with what they have done. Send them back so that they themselves might judge them."

The Negus was not happy with this suggestion and said: "No. By God, I won't surrender them to anyone until I myself call them and question them about what they have been accused. If what these two men have said is true, then I will hand them over to you. If however it is not so, then I shall protect them so long as they desire to remain under my protection."

The Negus then summoned the Muslims to meet him and asked:

"What is this religion which you have introduced for yourself and which has served to cut you off from the religion of your people? You also did not enter my religion nor the religion of any other community."

Jafar ibn Abi Talib then advanced and made a speech that was moving and eloquent and which is still one of the most compelling descriptions of Islam, the appeal of the noble Prophet and the condition of Makkan society at the time. He said: "O King, we were a people in a state of ignorance and immorality, worshipping idols and eating the flesh of dead animals, committing all sorts of abomination and shameful deeds, breaking the ties of kinship, treating guests badly and the strong among us exploited the weak. "We remained in this state until Allah sent us a Prophet, one of our own people whose lineage, truthfulness, trustworthiness and integrity were well-known to us. "He called us to worship Allah alone and to renounce the stones and the idols which we and our ancestors used to worship besides Allah.

"He commanded us to speak the truth, to honor our promises, to be kind to our relations, to be helpful to our neighbors, to cease all forbidden acts, to abstain from bloodshed, to avoid obscenities and false witness, not to appropriate an orphan's property nor slander chaste women.

"He ordered us to worship Allah alone and not to associate anything with him, to uphold Prayer, to give compulsory charity (Zakat) and fast in the month of Ramadan.

"We believed in him and what he brought to us from Allah and we follow him in what he has asked us to do and we keep away from what he forbade us from doing.

"Thereupon, O King, our people attacked us, visited the severest punishment on us to make us renounce our religion and take us back to the old immorality and the worship of idols.

"They oppressed us, made life intolerable for us and obstructed us from observing our religion. So we left for your country, choosing you before anyone else, desiring your protection and hoping to live in Justice and in peace in your midst."

The Negus was impressed and was eager to hear more. He asked Jafar: "Do you have with you something of what your Prophet brought concerning God?" "Yes," replied Jafar.

"Then read it to me," requested the Negus. Jafar, in his rich, melodious voice recited for him the first portion of Surah Maryam (Mary) which deals with the story of Jesus and his mother Mary.

On hearing the words of the Quran, the Negus was moved to tears. To the Muslims, he said: "The message of your Prophet and that of Jesus came from the same source..." To Amr and his companion, the Qurayshi emissaries, he said: "Go. For, by God, I will never surrender them to you" and to Jafar and his companions following further questioning he replied: "Go, for you are safe and secure. Whoever obstructs you will pay for it and whoever opposes you will be punished. For, by God, I would rather not have a mountain of gold than that anyone of you should come to any harm."

From this account one can draw many points, the appreciation of shared values, acknowledgement of common interests and the building of inclusive communities through collective endeavour. To be a nation truly representative

of its people we are obliged to listen to each other and to learn how to work together to fulfil our collective potential and realise the strengths of our diversity. Dialogue and inter faith relations form an intrinsic part of the make up of the Islamic faith, as evidenced by the story of Jafar.

As we build bridges of understanding through dialogue we introduce ourselves to one another, thereby clarifying misunderstanding and correcting much of the prevalent disinformation that pervades. Peaceful co-existence becomes a reality in this multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-faith community, when we understand and appreciate each other's way of life and culture. Inter faith relations are not about changing other people's ways but about attaining a level of understanding and respecting one another.

As with Jafar's companions, Britain's Muslims are a young community, although more of them are born and raised in Britain. Their parents come from many ethnic backgrounds and cultures with a rich diversity of heritages. A 'community of communities', British Muslims have been, and are, united through strong ties of faith identity that transcends ethnic boundaries. It is the moral and ethical principles of their faith that urges them to be concerned and responsible citizens and active participants in the life of their nation. In many respects the needs and aspirations of Britain's Muslim community are no different from those of our fellow citizens – whatever their beliefs or backgrounds. Concerns about health and education, national prosperity, strong public infrastructure and good public services are common to us all and these concerns have led to many positive outcomes such as the increasing emphasis on faith based schools, along with the protection of halal and schechita laws from the Islamic and Jewish dietary requirements. In many instances cooperation has led to the achievement of common goals.

The values of community life, the need to build strong communities of mutual support, are basic principles that connect Muslims to their fellow citizens. From our diverse backgrounds and beliefs we can make common cause to achieve a better Britain for everyone. We seek to give voice to the whole range of principles, ideas and concerns that British Muslims will contribute to

the national debate, not merely for their own interests, but the common good of our shared future.

That said, there are increasingly cynical attempts made to divide us in spite of our diversity, which leads to regressive reactions and a growing refusal by many to reach out to one another giving rise to tension and sometimes erupting in violence in our communities. This is compounded by comments such as those espoused by senior figures like Nazir Ali which negatively impact on local relationships between Christians and Muslims. We see no need for clergy to issue fatwa on Muslim practices or vice versa. We are in danger of creating a climate where we are at best ambivalent of each other, or, at worst, fearful of one another. But I hasten to reassure you, it is not all doom and gloom.

Collectively we need to show the strength of will and courage to overcome hurdles of difference and get to know one another. To stand in support of one another when our religious beliefs are attacked or our practices threatened. We believe in unity in our diversity, for diversity in humanity is the message of Islam. Contrary to assertions that religions have been used to foster hatred and sow destruction, the essential message in the Qur'an is the unity of humankind and its potential as a positive force for harmony and cooperation. Rather than regarding diversity as a source of inevitable tensions, the Qur'an states that human variety is indispensable when defining common beliefs, values and traditions in community life:

“O human kind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-fearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware.” (Quran 49:14)

Imagine a multi-coloured flower garden and compare it to a monochromatic flower garden, which will people prefer? I believe that overwhelming number of people many among us, Muslims, Christians, Jews and others value the essential unity of the human race in its diversity. By diversity however we

certainly do not mean isolation, segregation or insularity for that surely defeats the whole purpose of diversity.

We live in a community of communities, where multi-culturalism is in some respects a by-product of our imperial past, and has served to shape British cultural heritage. Whatever one may say about this most controversial part of British History, one could argue that the Empire brought together disparate peoples, many of whom asserted their own identity whilst remaining part of one entity. Those who came to this country were happy with that model, and post-war Britain was built on this construct. Granted, we've had a few bumps along the way, but, up until 9/11, we were all happy to extol the virtues of the British system. Now, many are holding the knife and attempting to give it the decisive blow. Those who used to extol its virtues could not run fast enough to escape its all-encompassing embrace.

We are witnessing an enforcement of a model from some parts of Europe such as France and Germany where the individual must be subservient to the State, where difference must be stamped out at all costs, where liberty is secondary to the priorities of the State. The question is, will decades of British tradition be able to stand aside from an onslaught from these quarters? I would contend no, our sense of fair play and being practical should prevail. It depends, however, on how much we are prepared to give in to the prevailing culture of fear.

It is increasingly evident that the features of the current debate now narrowly focuses on British Muslims and young British Muslims in particular, and their alleged inability to integrate with the rest of society. I contend that the issue is much wider than that, it involves our young, be they Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Sikh or otherwise, black, white or brown.

In essence, I feel we must focus on giving young people space and time to formulate their own identities. To provide plenty of avenues that help formulate a positive British identity. This cannot be a top-down approach: whether that be from Government, mosques, churches, synagogues or the

community leadership. All have a role, but if we pander to the headlines that pressurises our young, we can expect a backlash and unsatisfactory results

It is young people, more than people like me, who will determine what British identity looks and feels like. Their awareness of, but with some detachment from, the cultural heritage of their parents, will allow them to draw more widely from the varying cultural heritages from different parts of the globe bring. They will pick and mix. They will also be able to advance in areas which we've only just began to explore. For instance – what is the Muslim contribution to the arts, to literature to British culture? Interesting times lie ahead. But the goal must be an identity into which the entire community – with all its diversity – can be accommodated and one that sits comfortably within the context of a multi-faith and multi-ethnic Britain. Following tragic events such as 7/7 we have stood shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with each other, looking to our collective security to forge a future together.

Naturally, as Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, I support the notion that religion can bring about a solution rather than a problem. Strife is not a uniquely religious concern. The historian Niall Ferguson has recently charted how the last century was one of the bloodiest. Very few of the conflicts of the 20th century were about religion. People fought over ethnicity and ideology. The Carnegie Commission argued “religious diversity does not spawn violence independently of predisposing social, economic and political condition as well as the subject roles of belligerent leaders.” (extracted from Carnegie Commission Final Report on Presenting Deadly Conflict 1997). Bruce Lincoln, the religious historian reached the same conclusion when he wrote that in most of the post cold war conflict in which religious issues have played a role it was “in a context where structural problems inherent to the nation state have become manifest.” I firmly believe that our dear religion, properly understood and projected, can only serve as a source of immense good not only for the Muslim community but for the society as a whole.

For example, it is incumbent on Muslims to care for our neighbours, irrespective of faith. Yet how many of us actually uphold this value? Much can

be said, however for initiatives such as Islam Awareness Week, whose theme this year was “One World” and is now in its thirteenth year, have contributed significantly to breaking down these barriers to diversity.

If deployed faithfully, the solution is apparent for all to see. Religion, after all, calls for the common good, for the public interest and emphasises the value of life. Take, for example, the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, they are derived from, amongst others the necessity of the public interest. The inter faith activities that the MCB engages in have done much to dispel tensions among communities.

Equally we seek to sure up our freedoms, including the freedom of speech, an absolute right, which entails responsibility and sensitivity towards others. If freedom of speech were to end, it would only end when that speech would lead to hatred and violence against others.

As citizens of Britain, Muslims have a social contract to maintain the peace and stability of this country. No one must be tempted to commit any criminal or subversive activity. As citizens of this country and an integral part of British society, we not only have rights, but also have obligations. We do not claim any special rights. All we expect is fairness and equality. Let there be no doubt in our minds that we have the obligation to participate. We have the obligation to contribute. We have the obligations of good-neighbourliness, of being concerned for others, to share their joys and feel their pains, to provide support and help wherever we can. This is what our faith requires of us. This is our unilateral responsibility. We have an obligation to encourage all that is good and discourage all that is harmful.

We need to demonstrate to our own communities here in Britain and to the world at large that our shared aspirations for a lasting peace based on justice and international law and our opposition to war is stronger and more enduring than our differences.

By holding out our own example of multi-faith and multi-cultural co-existence and co-operation here in Britain, we must do what we can to instill a sense of hope and optimism for our future. Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs and others regularly participate in multi-faith forums and events both at national and local level. This advances understanding and goodwill. The work we do together helps promote the practical well-being of all our communities. And of course, across towns and cities across the country we live as neighbours, our children attend the same schools and we work in the same organisations. The lesson of all this must be that there is another way to resolving our differences: whether we live in Britain or elsewhere. This message needs to be reinforced at grassroots level through our mosques, churches, synagogues, temples and gurudwaras. Our religious leaders have a crucial role to play here.

The only war that need be waged is a war against our common enemies: here in Britain and increasingly across Europe we need to fight racism and discrimination. We need jointly to resist the rise of the far right. Perhaps one of the greatest evils is poverty. We should help both in increasing aid and in promoting fair trade. Through this evening's event, I urge that we harness the goodwill and co-operation that exists among all faiths and present a united platform for peace. Here at home we hope to reinforce good community relations through this practical expression of unity and co-operation for the common good.

As a Muslim, I feel the message of compassion and social justice needs to be flagged up. Now more than in any previous era, the world needs a spiritual message that enables societies to heal human suffering and protect religion from the perversion of cruel fanaticism. Faith communities have a duty to foster a culture of peace and build a partnership aiming to promote equality of opportunity for all in society. We strive towards a Britain where all are at peace and ease with one another, where our differences are respected and we all have an equal opportunity to excel and contribute to the common good of our nation.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you.

Peace Be Upon You.