

The Role of Muslims in Constructing a Better Britain

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24 April 2008, University of Cambridge

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In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

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

First, I must thank the Centre for Faith in Society for inviting me to deliver this lecture. The work undertaken by your centre is extremely valuable. I commend your important, fact-based analysis of faith communities, the institutions they build, their national and international contribution and their interface with government, business, and the wider civic sphere. Never has there been a more urgent imperative to appreciate the role of faith in public policy and in the civic sphere, and never has there been a more poignant moment for faith communities to make a contribution guided by what they hold dear, and to reach out to people of all faiths and none.

My brief today is to outline ways in which British Muslims, one of the largest and perhaps youngest faith communities in this country, can construct a better Britain. Despite the challenges that Muslims face, even though we are sadly cast as a problem community, I earnestly hope that at the end of my time with you today you leave with a sense of optimism and hope. Muslims have been part of Britain's success story and has helped contribute to the vitality of multicultural Britain.

Muslims have been with Britain in good times and in bad -- the Muslim names emblazoned on countless First and Second World War memorials around the world testify to this fact. And the sacrifice of British Muslims endures to this day with the participation of Muslim men and women in our armed forces, our emergency services and in our public services. The Muslim contribution to Britain has pedigree, and we can all ensure that it continues.

Forty Years ago this month, assassin's bullets killed that dreamer par-excellence, Martin Luther King, but hopelessly failed to extinguish his dreams and his hopes. In the four decades since, America has translated some of his dream into reality, so much so that another visionary appears today with his 'audacity of hope' inspiring a whole nation with the rousing slogan – 'Yes, we can', promising to take Dr. King's dream to the very pinnacle of success. Today, Mr Obama represents the idea that Americans can transcend the polarisation and division that race once represented.

For me, the moral of this story is that it is not foolish to dream or naive to be optimistic. Hope and dream are the very stuff on which nations and civilisations are made. The question is, here in Britain do we have similar courage to build a new Britain for the twenty first century and beyond?

Though I lead a faith-based organisation, I have been elected because of my community work. From an early age, my family has taught me the premium my faith places on social work, on serving others. Growing up in rural Bangladesh, I was told that 'Serving human beings is serving God'. This divine duty is placed upon me as a Muslim, but I am responsible to all human beings, regardless of creed. The Qur'an insists, *'You are a community of excellence, raised for the whole of humanity'*. I am sure this is the essence of all religions, especially the three Abrahamic ones. When I first came to this country in the late 1970s I was amazed to find hospitals named after religious figures, Christian saints in history. Spiritual and physical healing is in the spirit of religion. This aspect of our religion is often ignored by many within the Muslim community itself.

Due to the misunderstanding and misinformation propagated by sections of the mainstream media, especially after the terrible atrocities of 9/11, Islam is seen only from the prism of politics or security – ours is described as a problem faith with problematic followers. This manifests itself in our newspaper headlines, day-in and day-out, not only in our tabloids, but also the broadsheets, as well as on our airwaves, all creating serious adverse effects on community relations. This drip-feed of disparagement about Muslims is affecting ordinary people on the street. Law after law on 'anti-terrorism' is being passed which essentially singles out Muslim people and poll after poll is being published to prove how problematic Muslims are.

Many in my community do not recognise the narrative being imposed upon us. How could such a faith whose Last Prophet tells us to 'remove a harmful object from the street as it is an essential part of faith' promote violence? That is not to say that our Muslim community is without its challenges, but it is unfair to cast us off as somehow foreign, suspect and alien even though our faith provides an animating force for what many describe today as 'cohesion' and integration.

I compare this situation with a glass of water seen through a microscope - if you do that, you may not want to drink the water because of the many microbes present! Is there any community which is whiter than white? Muslims in Britain are a disparate community, a community of communities, from all backgrounds – ethnic, geographical, linguistic, cultural and even religious interpretation. Whilst they have diverse origins, and varied outlooks, they do have issues and concerns that are common to them. Currently, a large proportion of the community perform badly in many important socio-economic indicators. The reasons may be because of the common cultural and faith issues faced by the community. The solutions offered need to be creative and cognitive of these concerns.

However, there has also been an encouraging improvement in many areas in the past decade. Younger people were integrating, making Britain their proud home, contributing to one of the most dynamic economies on earth. Sadly, the disproportionate focus on this community through the lens of security, especially on its youth, is having its damaging effect. Young Muslims are the most affected, they are at the sharp end of all the debates and negative discourse. They ask, quite rightly in my view, why they must always face this unequal treatment.

By judging such a state of affairs in such a pessimistic light, I can easily be accused of wallowing in my own perceived victimhood. Indeed, I have been accused of this very thing by newspapers who questioned my temerity to challenge their divisive agenda of hate and their sensational reporting of Muslims. But they have not even spared the Archbishop of Canterbury who had the gall of recently uttering the word '*Shariah*' in his thoughtful academic deliberation in front of prominent lawyers. Forces of prejudice always shrink in despair when communities embrace each other with open arms and take steps forward to work together towards building a shared future. So whilst I worry about the treatment of Muslims, and the stoking up of tensions by a cynical media, I find

an ocean of optimism amongst fellow Britons who have faith in our common humanity. I feel that the distractions created by cynics should not be allowed to inhibit us in our shared journey.

My optimism is embedded in me because of my firm belief in our holy book, the Qur'an, which decries pessimism as being against religious teachings. I also believe in the inherent goodness in human beings. According to another *hadith* (saying) of our beloved Prophet (peace be upon him) 'all human beings are born innocent.' It is the environment that turns them away from goodness. So, it is our collective responsibility to work for the common good. As Mark Twain puts it, "we should always do right. This will gratify some people and astonish the rest."

The appreciation of shared values, acknowledgement of common interests and the building of inclusive communities is a collective endeavour, an enterprise where we can surely not only 'astonish' but also 'inspire the rest'.

Britain's Muslims are a young community. More than one third are under the age of 16. However, their needs and aspirations are no different from those of other fellow citizens. Concerns about health and education, national prosperity, strong public infrastructure and good public services are common to us all. In many instances these concerns have led to cooperative works bringing many positive outcomes - such as the increasing emphasis on faith based schools, *halal* and *schechita* laws for the protection of Islamic and Jewish dietary requirements and interest-free banking. In the current climate we have similar concern for security and law and order for our country.

The values of community life and the need to build strong communities of mutual support are basic principles that connect Muslims to their fellow citizens. Muslims must understand that no community can insulate and protect itself from the dangers around them. Many of us in society set up projects to save their own children from social diseases, such as drugs, gang fights, binge drinking. But we often fail to appreciate that if the neighbour's children are not included in this endeavour soon they will influence our own children as well. We swim or sink together. However, this is not necessarily a message of self-preservation, as we are commanded to reach out regardless of the outcome or who the people are.

From our diverse backgrounds and beliefs we have endeavoured to achieve a better Britain for everyone. We have sought to give voice to the whole range of principles, ideas and concerns that are based on social justice. British Muslims have contributed to the national debate, not merely for their own interests, but for the common good of our shared future.

Those who are sceptical of the value of multiculturalism and diversity would do well to remember this. Many Muslims appreciate the importance of pluralism, and recognise difference as a source of vitality. The Qur'an states that human variety is indispensable when defining common beliefs, values and traditions in community life:

“O mankind, 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)

I ask you a rhetorical question - imagine a multi-coloured flower garden and compare it to a monochromatic one, which one would you prefer? I believe that the overwhelming number of people - Muslims, Christians, Jews and others - would 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.

Some countries in Europe, like France, have a policy of assimilation in which minority cultures are absorbed into the majority one. Britain adopted a course of integration, that was described by the reforming Home Secretary Roy Jenkins in 1966 as 'equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.

Our vision is of a pluralist society with a conscious policy of recognizing that people's cultural and faith identities are not merely a private matter, but ones that have public implications. We support Professor Bhiku Parekh's vision of a multicultural society as one that respects all cultures and which values cultural diversity 'as a part of its own self-understanding'. This places an equal responsibility on all of us to be citizens, and be fully participative of our national identity.

The issue of multiculturalism is haunting post-7/7 Britain. It has become tied to and confused with a range of concerns such as immigration, extremism and national security. But we are in danger of throwing away the baby with the bath water. Up until 9/11 we were all content with the very British compromise which witnessed gradual tweaks to the system and negotiated settlements at various levels. Now, many are holding the knife to all these achievements and attempting to give a decisive blow to hard-won rights. Instead of casting out the single most attractive feature of living in Britain – its freedoms and diversity – we should be seeing how some of the issues can be tackled, perhaps through more interfaith networks, and other pragmatic partnership programmes.

Sadly, we are witnessing a gradual enforcement of a model from some parts of Europe such as France and Germany, where it seems 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 way forward is not a forced assimilationist, monochrome, monocultural approach.

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: be that from government, mosques, churches, synagogues or the community leadership. All have a role, but if we pander to the headlines that pressurise 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 and a sense of belonging to Britain – which fosters the emotional attachment which will allow them to define their multiple identity. They will pick and mix. They will also be able to advance in areas which we've only just begun to explore. For instance – what is the Muslim contribution to the arts and literature to British culture? Interesting times lie ahead. But the goal must be an identity into which the entire society – with all its diversity – can be accommodated and one that sits comfortably within the context of a multi-faith and multi-ethnic Britain.

Naturally, as Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, I feel confident that faith can bring about a solution rather than a problem. The Muslim community with its root in Islamic teachings has many common values to share with other fellow citizens. The teachings of Islam had been instrumental in creating cohesive, peaceful and prosperous societies in Andalusia, Ottoman Balkans and Mughal India in their inspirational days. Sadly Muslims as a community are floundering, but Islam retains the same spirit in encouraging its followers to contribute significantly to a better Britain. How? I will mention a few areas where Muslims can share their religious teachings with others for the good of all.

My first example centres on the importance my faith places on those around us. Just as the Bible teaches us to 'serve thy neighbour', it is incumbent on Muslims to care for our neighbours, irrespective of faith. Our beloved Prophet (peace be upon him) was so insistent on Muslims' neighbourhood responsibility that when his companions once asked who the neighbours were he said, '*forty houses on your right and forty on your left.*' Initiatives such as *Islam Awareness Week* and *Open Day events* in many mosques are driving this point home.

My second example centres on the universality of family and family values that is weakening under the strain of modern life. In Britain the number of marriages are now at an all time low. How true is G K Chesterton's wisdom, "The triangle of truisms, of father, mother, and child, cannot be destroyed - it can only destroy those civilizations which disregard it." In a recent speech, Mr Justice Coleridge, a Family Division judge for England and Wales, warned the results of neglecting the family could be as destructive as global warming and we are not doing enough to prevent a "meltdown" in family life. Marriage based family life has been the bedrock of Islam and indeed the whole of human civilisation. Thus strengthening the institution of family and the values that contribute to it, could be a wonderful joint endeavour of Muslims and other citizens to bring back some happiness in our life.

My third example, and concern, centres on the plight of children. Last year's UNICEF report on children's happiness paints a sad state of affairs for Britain. Putting children at the heart of family life a crucial part of any strategy to make them happy. This will help society in addressing the issues of delinquency, anti-social behaviour and disrespect for others. Thus involved and loving parenting is essential. Islam teaches us the importance

of parental priority or sacrifice for their children in order for parents to lead through example. This is an area where we all can work together. Last year one of Britain's major Charities, the Children's Society, formed a 'Good Childhood Inquiry' panel to find out how childhood could be made happier. I am proud to be a member of this panel.

The sign of a civilised society is how it looks after its weak and vulnerable, and this is the fourth example of how faith can and should play a vital role. While in traditional societies it is essentially a family responsibility, developed societies are dependent on the state in this area, especially with the rise of nuclear families. There also has developed an acute problem of how we treat the elderly. As a result, many old people are ending up in care homes and suffer in silence while the children of working parents are bundled off to child care centres. Our most basic duty of care is being franchised out to generic service providers. There is a serious flaw in here. Elderly people have wonderful life experiences to share with the younger generation, they can provide loving care to their grandchildren and help families in economic difficulty as well. In return, they get the company they need and feel valued. This is an area where religious values can really play a major role.

Human beings are multi-dimensional. Their happiness does not necessarily depend on economic prosperity, power and fame. It depends on good work, charity and helpfulness to others, my fifth citation to the importance of faith. The concept of *Khidmah* or service to human beings is unique in Islam, and so with other religions. The old adage, *'better to die for others than to live for oneself'* is now understood to be a vital ingredient for contentment in modern stressful life. In life some are abler than others, but the abler ones have a social responsibility towards the disadvantaged. *'And in their wealth there is a rightful share for the needy and destitute – says the Qur'an 51:19.* Moreover there is a beautiful *hadith* (saying) of our Prophet (peace be upon him), who says. 'In the Day of Judgement God will say, 'O son of Adam, I was ill and you did not visit Me.' The man will say, 'O my Lord, how could I visit You, when You are the Lord of all the worlds?' God will say, 'Did you not know that My servant so-and-so was ill and you did not visit him? Did you not know that if you had visited him you would have found Me with him?'

My sixth example is about how faith has and should now speak up about the custodianship of our environment. Our small planet has seen unparalleled prosperity,

albeit very unequal, in the last century. But this happened at the cost of massive damage to our environment, thanks to uncontrolled human greed for profit and power. Suddenly the world has now woken up with the crude reality of an impending disaster to the whole human race. Islam teaches us to remain measured, from individual level to state level, and look after God's creation, as human beings have trusteeship over earth (Qur'an 2: 29-30).

In my final citation, I would like to stress the importance of faith itself, of devotion, of the need to appreciate the Divine and seek a spiritual equilibrium. I, like my friends in many other faiths, lament on the spiritual void that modern life has created. Human misery is palpable in personal life, as is conflict and confrontation in societies and nations. The unhappiness and stress, in spite of material wealth, is leading people to depression, addiction, alcoholism, violence, child abuse and other social diseases. Fear of and phobia of others is costing communal peace and harmony. Spirituality based on patience, contentment and reliance on God in happiness and distress is unique and can give solace to modern life. I would like to share with you something published in that fine journal 'The Tablet', commenting on Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting: "In a multicultural society, community relations are not fostered by the suppression of difference but by the celebration of goodwill.....Catholicism received an injection of devotional inspiration from Islam in the Middle Ages, for which it has every reason to be eternally grateful, and it is to Muslims that Catholics can turn now for inspiration in the value of fasting"

Religion, after all, calls for the common good 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. Public interest depends on freedoms, including the freedom of speech, which entails responsibility and sensitivity towards others, their religious and cultural values. Sadly, in recent years we have seen deliberate attempt to vilify our Prophet (peace be upon him) in the name freedom of expression. Does it help anyone?

We 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. We have a duty

to make sure all have an equal opportunity to excel and contribute to the common good of our nation. Each individual and every community has its obligation in it.

In a statement recently issued by a coalition of Muslim organisations, we said

“We urge all fellow British Muslims to reach out and create positive connections with neighbours and friends. We remind ourselves that with rights comes responsibilities and that we remain at all times accountable to God for our thoughts as well as deeds.”

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 and positive action.

In conclusion, I re-emphasise our commitment for a common good of Britain, a better Britain. Let there be no doubt in our minds that we have the obligation to participate and engage. 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. I conclude with a remarkable verse from the Qur'an,

“Help one another to virtue and God-consciousness and do not help one another to sin and transgression.” (The Qur'an 5:2)

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to address you. Peace Be Upon You.