

Speech by MCB Secretary General Iqbal Sacranie at the launch of Islam Awareness Week 2003 at the House of Commons

3rd November 2003

Britain's Muslim community represents a rich diversity of peoples from widely different ethnic backgrounds and cultures. Since their arrival in the UK they have made use of the opportunities given to them to find new roots and contribute to and share in the society around them. But Muslims contribution to this country did not start only in the 20th century. In fact the interaction and the exchange of knowledge and ideas that have helped shape modern Britain started many centuries ago.

The modern world takes for granted the inventions that allow us to travel thousands of miles within hours and send information across the world in minutes. These huge technological advances did not come out from a vacuum. They were built on solid foundations that were laid by civilisations we seldom here about in our school textbooks. Every nation and people at some point in human history has played their part in the advancements in human society. The part played by Muslim civilisations was no small contribution. As early as the 8th century a man by the name of Al-Khwarizim was exploring new ideas and thoughts in the field of mathematics. His most famous mathematical work is *The Book of Summary in the Process of Calculation for Restoration and Equation*. Or to put it in a more familiar term: "algebra". In fact the word algebra is derived from the term al-Jabr in the title of the book. This was a giant leap for mankind, for without algebra modern mathematics would not have been possible.

If we take another example, in the field of medicine Ibn Sina, known in Europe as Avicenna, wrote "The Canon of Medicine" in the 11th century. It is still one of the most important medical books ever written. After it was translated into Latin in the 12th century it served as one of the key Medical textbooks in Europe for nearly 600 years.

In the field of Astronomy, Ulugh Beg constructed a three-storey observatory for solar observations in general, and for observations of the moon and planets in particular. The main instrument of the observatory was the Fakhri Sextant, which had a radius of around 40 metres, making it the largest astronomical instrument of its type in the world. The observations made by Ulugh Beg were very advanced for his time and surprisingly accurate. His calculation that the stellar year is 365 days, 6 hours, 10 minutes and 8 seconds, is remarkable as it is only 62 seconds more than the present estimation.

These are only few of the many examples of enormous gains in knowledge and learning made over a thousand years of Muslim history. A history that needs to be taught to our younger generation, together with the history of all the people that now make the rich tapestry of British society. Knowing one another, as the verses in the Qur'an urges us to do (Surah al Hujjarat 47:13), is the right basis for realising the common challenge facing all human beings. We are all called to live a good, upright life fulfilling our duties to ourselves, our family, community and society; it is the lived meaning of true consciousness of our status as God's creation.

For these reasons I wish to congratulate the Islamic Society of Britain for this innovative and inspiring initiative: The Virtual Class Room. It is a demonstration of how British Muslims are eager to reach out to their fellow Britons to build a more inclusive Britain. Further still, the positive reaction of 40 LEAs and countless schools across the country is proof that the ordinary people of this country are able and willing to learn about one another and to build a tolerant and peaceful society. The Virtual Class Room is a new approach to promoting understanding, dialogue and co-operation with society at large. A more inclusive Britain needs the active engagement and endeavours of all its communities and traditions, all the sources of its heritage and historic experience. The virtual classroom is a significant contribution and proof of the dedication of Britain's Muslim community to living up to this challenge. I wish the project every success and pray that we all benefit from it.