

Liverpool John Moore University Speech, 19 Feb 09

Religion, Belief and Faith Equality – in the context of Organisations and Education Sector

Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari

Secretary General, the Muslim Council of Britain

I am asked to address the complex and challenging issues of how educational institutions and employers should best ensure religion and belief equality and how far should they apply the principle of tolerance.

This is probably the sign of our time that even the academic institutions find themselves fixate on issues such as how to identify extremist behaviours without labelling and offending people. Obsessing over threats and snooping most certainly obscures the wholesome atmosphere which should have been the hallmark of our academic institutions.

While the presence of extremist fringe is totally unacceptable in any community including the Muslim, it is equally unacceptable to magnify the problem out of proportion. Not only are these elements not sanctioned by the community; but also the community watches in pain and horror how the good name of their faith which means 'peace' is wilfully tarnished and degraded by such mindless action.

However, as an optimist I firmly believe that individuals and institutions of understanding and goodwill can turn the worst of times into best of opportunities. Whatever might be the pressure from without; from the authorities and the media, the academic establishments should act on their own insight and try to concentrate on how to create value and effectiveness in a community maligned and marginalised by many.

It is important to strike a proper balance between security and human rights. Question of security provides a ready-made rationale to justify draconian measures against Muslims and their human rights. Reports published last year by both Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Demos

clearly demonstrated that current policies towards Muslims are not working. It has become an open season for sections of the media and politicians to undermine confidence among them.

If the objective is to promote the values we cherish such as liberty, human dignity and equality is it right to trample them under the feet at the first sign of trouble? Panic measures never solved any problem in history and it most certainly is not a way to achieve success. While it is a duty of every citizen to identify unwholesome behaviours, I would respectfully submit that nothing could be more degrading for an academic or an administrator to be asked to identify extremist behaviour in their institutions.

Difficult times require hard trade-offs and to go that extra mile in order to preserve a sense of fairness and minimise conflict. Building a new social vision for tomorrow's Britain is a complex task and can only be done on the foundation of mutual respect.

I would like to submit that today's world it is no longer sufficient to be simply 'tolerant' of the other, as this word has a negative connotation inherent in it. For tolerance institutionalises exclusion by confirming the centuries old feudal attitude of 'knowing your station'. The meaning of the word tolerance is, 'the ability, willingness, or capacity to tolerate something, or an allowable amount of variation of a specified quantity', according to the Oxford Dictionary of English. To '*tolerate something*' (or *someone*) implies a measure of reluctant acceptance of the other in '*an allowable amount or quantity*'. Such rationing always nurtures anxiety and unease, the very ingredient that can easily undo all laudable steps towards a more inclusive society. To tolerate the other is to accord them no more than a second class status.

Many would claim that in our society 'pecking order' of the communities is not only alive and well but even thriving; and it means in reality little has changed. This is precisely the reason why many nation states still consider new immigrants as 'strangers' and new cultures as 'alien',

bureaucrats burn their midnight oil busily drafting new rules and guidelines spelling out what amount of the variation could be allowed.

On the surface, a tolerant society is an inclusive multi-cultural society where excessive deference has largely disappeared. Such apparent cohesion is shallow and superficial, because below the surface, division and disparity remains a powerful factor. This gives rise to the idea of two communities in the same society; the 'host' community tends to see themselves superior to the relatively newcomer giving rise to a tension that often bursts into aggressive neo-nationalist tendency.

Every tension also opens a new window of opportunity, it is important that we do not see such potential social strife only as a threat. Opportunities for bold attempts to move forward and achieve change do not only come during good times but often arises during the challenging period. Let us make a sharp break with the lazy habits of the past.

The first change in attitude I would like to propose is **community cohesion** on a balanced foundation of mutual respect, not just on tolerance. If we want to profit from the social capital in full, we can begin with according same respect to all our peoples. Nothing empowers a human being more than according him the value and respect he/she rightfully deserves. The sooner we acknowledge that everyone, irrespective of their birth, background or belief, brings some unique value to the collective project we call society will we be able to transform our country into a cohesive, progressive human society.

It can be achieved only when we accept that human differences are there to acknowledge and celebrate; not to look down upon each other or not to live parallel life. The Qur'an proclaims,

“Human beings, We created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Verily the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-conscious of you” (49:13).

Our differences are therefore no more than tools of mutual recognition and human worth should only be measured in terms of their moral value and not material circumstances.

Since its inception in 1997 the MCB is working for the 'common good' of society, this is our motto enshrined in our constitution. On issues like counter-terrorism, the MCB is in frequent contact with the authorities. We note the work done by the Muslim Contact Unit and Muslim Safety Forum. The MCB Guide to Rights and Responsibilities underlines our contribution to this landscape along with our letters to Mosques after each acts of violence to report criminality in whichever form it takes.

We need a better approach to combating terrorism. Our aim must be to enlist the Muslim community in the fight against terror, rather than victimise it. We need a clear and consistent message of goodwill from the society for the Muslim community. This need to be followed up by action: to address the root cause of unfair and subservient foreign policy. Credible intelligence, surgical operation and sensitive handling of the community are important. One female youth organisation recently said:

“I think there is a lack of understanding of Islam, due to these small things like growing a beard and attending mosque regularly, the police may interpret it as extremist behaviour. If there was better understanding of Islam then these misunderstandings will be avoided and reduce innocent behaviour being seen as extremist.”

Members of the Police and security forces need more community cultural training by members of the community. Muslim youth, particularly within university settings, need space and should not be negatively portrayed as was done by successive DIUS and DCSF guidance. Their radical views, ideas and concerns need to be heard and incorporated into mainstream dialogue.

The most urgent issue today is the growing perception amongst Muslims that they are being unfairly targeted by the police and security services. So we must find ways to tackle terrorism and crime by creating a climate of understanding that acknowledges British Muslims as part of the solution. We also genuinely need to identify the causes that propel young people to despondence with some in criminality. I will give two examples;

1. The University of Nottingham case

In May last year, a PhD student, Rizwan Sabir, downloaded some material to help him in the preparation for his PhD on radical Islamic groups. According to his supervisor, the material was actually on his reading list. Sabir asked a friend, Hesham Yezza, working in an administrative capacity at the university, to print it out for him. Both were arrested under the Terrorism Act 2000. Though they were released, the latter then faced re-arrest on unrelated immigration issues.

You can imagine how much this incident has upset the Muslim student community. Particularly moving was Sabir's account of his detention: *"they had sealed off the entire second floor of the prison. We were kept in solitary confinement. Our only human contact – apart from the detention officers and my lawyer – was with a judge that smiled down on us whilst stamping an authorisation order for a further five days detention. For the first 12 hours I was incommunicado. For the first 2 days I was on a 24-hour watch. Two officers sat outside my open cell door, watching my every move and making notes in a custody log. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I was too scared to pray, lest that be used against me. My property was seized, forensically examined, and my family evicted. My car was compounded and my friends and lecturers repeatedly questioned. I was photographed, fingerprinted, foot-printed and DNA-swabbed. It was the first time in my life I had felt so criminalised and degraded...my feeling upon release was sheer relief and happiness; the joy of freedom and the pleasure of seeing my loved*

ones was something I had never encountered before. But beneath it all lay terrifying thoughts and questions; what would have happened if I had been charged? How would I have coped in a maximum-security prison? The answers to these questions still haunt me today.

The authorities have a tough job fighting terrorism. But locking away innocent people without prior investigation (for what may soon be 42 days) to later release them without charge is certainly not the way. It is not the way to make Britain safer. It is not the way to bring a multicultural and multiracial society together. It is not the way to unite British citizens against terrorism, but it is a way of setting a very worrying precedent that might achieve just the opposite."

2. Concerns with the Database Society

The MCB has received communications on the increase of stop and search under Section 44 of the Terrorism Act. Those contacting the MCB have included Muslim women - Section 44 gives police the power to stop and search people in specific areas without the reasonable need to suspect them of being involved in terrorism. However the human rights body Liberty notes that it *"should only be used when there is evidence of a specific terrorist threat. It should not be simply an addition to the day to day powers of officers policing protests."* One of the consequences of being 'stopped and searched' is likely inclusion in the National DNA database (NDNAD) – as noted by Professor Hutton, Chair of its Ethics Group in his evidence to the House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution. He told the Committee that *"there are some groups who are hugely over represented on the database in relation to their population" and that this "was related to the stop and search policy which is occurring in community policing"*. Muslim community groups are also conscious of increased levels of surveillance - even Muslim clubs meeting in a scout hut have been targeted.

I've raised some of the concerns suggested some ways forward. We have shown our readiness to work in partnership with any one who cares to work for the benefit of the whole society. We would be happy and willing to work on any initiatives that result in a safer country for all ensuring that justice is served equally and is also seen to be done.

In essence, I feel we must focus on giving young people space and time to formulate their own identities and to provide plenty of avenues that help formulate a positive British identity. This cannot only be a top-down approach: whether that is 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 the students and young people, rather 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. 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 multiethnic Britain.

Naturally, I firmly believe 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.” I firmly believe that our 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? Initiatives, such as Islam Awareness Week in the British Universities, are contributing significantly to breaking down barriers.

Our message is loud and clear - as citizens of Britain, the Muslim community is obligated to maintain peace and stability of our country. We not only have rights, but also have obligations. We do not claim any special rights. All we expect is fairness and equality. From an Islamic point of view Muslims have a unilateral obligation to interact and engage with all around us, irrespective of their background. 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. We have an obligation to encourage all that is good and discourage all that is harmful. No one must be tempted to commit any criminal or subversive activity for whatever the reason. Anyone committing any criminal act should go through the due process of law.

As a Muslim, I feel the message of compassion and social justice needs to be flagged up. Now more than ever before, 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've tried to address some of the most serious concerns raised and suggested some ways forward. I restate the Muslim community's

readiness to work with all. We have no desire to be mere spectators. That would not benefit this land or the Muslim community. By resolving these issues we will have a community that can feel justified in trusting the police and other law and order agencies who would be able to do the real job of securing our nation from threats. We are happy and willing to work with others on any initiative that result in a safer country for all ensuring that justice is served equally and is also seen to be done.

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