Religion & Multiculturalism: Prospects & Prescriptions

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Firstly I would like to introduce the work of The **Muslim Council of Britain** which exists to play a constructive role in achieving a nation at ease with itself: accepting of diversity, yet able to appreciate shared values, acknowledge common interests and build 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. Britain's Muslims are predominantly young, and 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.

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 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.

We live in a multi-ethnic community with representatives from every continent of the world. This brings with it a wealth of different languages, cultures and backgrounds. Indeed as the Prophet upon whom be peace said in his Farewell Address:

"O human beings! Your Creator and Sustainer is indeed One and your ancestor is one. All of you descend from Adam and Adam was made of earth. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab nor for a non-Arab over an Arab; neither for a white man over a black man nor a black man over a white man - except he superiority gained through God-consciousness (taqwa). Indeed the most noble and honourable among you is he one who is most deeply conscious of God."

So tolerance of internal differences and diversity is a practical necessity for us.

As Muslims we increasingly have direct experience of living amongst other faith groups. This means that in our daily lives, from the mundane to the momentous, we interact with others who share a different set of beliefs to us. We are bound together in a shared community in Britain.

"And among God's wondrous signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variety of your languages and colours. In all this indeed are signs for people with sound knowledge." (The Qur'an, 30: 22)

To make this diversity work, tolerance represents the minimum criteria for success. We have done it before.

Until its demise in the 1920s the Ottoman Chaliphate stood out as a marvelous example of tolerance and diversity: where Muslims, Jews, Christians and others lived successfully side-by-side – often in the face of

persecution and intolerance of minority groups in the rest of Europe. Tolerance is therefore an Islamic concept.

All faith groups have an interest in promoting tolerance and diversity. In the face of constant and misplaced charges that religion is the cause of conflicts around the world, it is our duty to prove this is not the case. What better way to demonstrate this than through our everyday actions?

So we agree tolerance and diversity is important. But how do we promote it? Our main challenge is to convey this message to our communities at the grass-roots. We need to encourage local initiatives that bring together different faith groups in the spirit of dialogue and co-operation.

Collectively we need to show the strength of will and courage to overcome hurdles of difference and get to know one another. 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 many among us, including members of the Muslim community 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.

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 years 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 inability to integrate with 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.

Our work towards multiculturalism in Britain is an ongoing, unfolding movement. It is a process that has evolved through the efforts of the grass roots and clear demonstrations of need. It was never just a gift from the powers that be. It was earned through hard and patient work.

The Muslim community itself has done much soul-searching and self-analysis. The MCB for example is in the process of collecting data on concerns and priorities in the community, particularly amongst younger Muslim men and women. This data has been collected through youth interviews (the MCB 'Muslims voices' project, on-going since August 2005), focus groups and imam's interviews (the MCB 'Voices from the minarets' project', September – November 2005[1]) and other means including the recent 'Connecting with the community' tour in August 2006.   This work is facing up to 'uncomfortable problems' and also identify examples of 'good practice'.

Here in Great Britain, we have a model and a practical implementation that makes us unique in the world – the bid for the Olympics 2012 succeeded because Lord Coe could draw on the London's diversity and harmonious community relations. He could say this because of the efforts of the City's Mayor to engage with diverse communities and draw them in as stakeholders.

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[1] Downloadable from http://www.mcb.org.uk/uploads/vfm.pdf

About one-third of Britain's 1.8 million Muslims live in London and most would not exchange it for life in any other city in the world.

National organisations like the MCB have an important role in providing leadership, but without the active involvement of local communities this potential remains unfulfilled. We need to look at what practical help and support we can collectively provide to encourage these initiatives. Many are already underway – and have been underway for a long time. We need to highlight such good practice examples so others may learn and be inspired by them.

Leaders of faith communities have an important role in provide the right type of leadership. It requires us to exercise judgement and wisdom. We need also to avoid giving into temptation. No matter how strong our urges to lapse into age-old myths and stereotypes about each other in troubled times. True leadership sets a good example – not just to one's own community – but to the whole community.

It is important that people take time to educate themselves and make a clear distinction between individuals and groups who commit unlawful acts and the communities they come from who through their faith would deplore such demeaning acts.

The 'militant tendency' and lunatic fringe are found everywhere and the presence of an extremist fringe in the Muslim community though probable, is intolerable. The problem is however caused when the media tries to blow them up and build into them into something real. By themselves they are nobody, yet the media allows them to reach out and possibly subvert the minds of the unknowing, aggrieved and impressionable youth.

That said, the MCB believes the interplay between security policy and public perception is now critical. A House of Commons' Home Affairs Committee report last year found 'overwhelming evidence' that the media exerted a powerful and often negative impact 'on public attitudes towards British

Muslims and that representatives of the media appeared unaware or dismissive of this.' This is a call for more balanced and responsible journalism. The last few weeks is a testament to this.

It has been stated by the Government that the threat is from members of the Islamic faith. The House of Commons' Home Affairs Committee in its Terrorism and Community Relations report (6 April 2005) noted that 'Muslims perceive that they are being stigmatised by [anti-terror] legislation'. The MCB believes that it is more than a matter of 'perception'. The report also finds 'overwhelming evidence' that the media exerted 'a powerful and often negative impact' on public attitudes towards British Muslims and that 'representatives of the media appeared unaware or dismissive of this.'

British Muslims are characterised as a 'problem community' in much of the media and through statements made by Government and police officials. These have contributed to a growing anti-Muslim climate in the UK. The Veil Debate, however, is now eclipsing the security issues but cementing antagonism today.

The British Psychological Society found that 'Hatred and dislike of Muslims hardened after 11 September, with 43 per cent of non- Muslims admitting that they had become noticeably more anti-Islamic.' The Report found only seventeen convictions for terrorism offences resulting from the 702 arrests under the terror laws up to December 2004. Of those only three were Muslim. A sense of perspective needs to be re-introduced into the debate.

It would seem that the much of the discussion regarding multiculturalism, integration and determining the nature of Britishness is for one reason or another being played out through the media. By conducting the discussion through the media and allowing for popularism, or to some more cynical eyes, appealing directly to the right wing voter, the government has simply polarised much of the community. The reaction has been a defensive and not a proactive discussion.

We all have a responsibility to engage constructively. As citizens of Britain, the Muslim community 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.

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 that "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 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 is "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 interfaith activities which the MCB engages in has 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 violence and disrespect against others.

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.

Finally, it is worth reminding ourselves that tolerance within our diversity is merely the beginning. It is a pre-requisite of a multi-faith Britain. But to build a *successful* multi-faith Britain we need to set our sights much higher. We need to be more pro-active. We need to celebrate as well as tolerate. This means actively working with one another on issues of mutual concern. It means going the extra mile in order to cement our friendship and co-operation. The future of the British Muslim community is bound up very closely with the state of our

society as a whole. We can only be a strong and vigorous community if the wider society is stable and strong. This is why the MCB has always stressed the need for all Muslims, in concert with others. Let's look to what is in the common good.

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

Peace Be Upon You.