

Towards an Inclusive Britain: The MCB Perspective

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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 Oxford/Cambridge Union for inviting me to deliver this lecture. The work undertaken by your society is extremely valuable in creating a dialogue on contemporary issues of significance. 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.

As I speak, our world is passing through a stark contrast between the worst of times and best of hope. We find ourselves face to face with the conflicting emotions of despair and optimism. Despair because of the spectre of a global economic meltdown and optimism generated by the Obama victory in America.

Sadly, the global economic crisis is characterised by an extraordinary phenomenon of greed and consumerism dislocated from the common good of society. One Guardian columnist recently called it, 'an economic system that can only be described as grotesque'. What is more intriguing is that nobody has been found guilty for causing this enormous hole in the world's coffers. The bankers reward themselves, while society suffers. Some economists have been calling the current economic system as 'Casino Economy'. This mirrors what the greatest oriental philosopher poet in modern history, Iqbal, said nearly a hundred years ago '*What they call commerce is a game of dice*'

This discredited financial practice needs to be overhauled. Ethical finance has a role to play to ensure that monies deposited are used for defined and productive purposes. Islam's injunction against usury and trading in debts resonate with many faith traditions, particularly the Abrahamic ones. A few weeks ago we in MCB hosted a ground breaking

2nd conference on Islamic Finance and Trade in London to articulate these alternative insights and help British economy in a small way.

Human society reaches for greatness almost always at the worst of times. So, when we can see nothing but depressing economic headlines everywhere, we can also see the silver lining around this dark cloud when America opted for the hope and change offered by someone who was seen an outsider. We hope president elect Obama succeeds in translating his vision into reality.

Can we hope for similar change here in Britain? My brief today is to outline ways in which British Muslims in general and MCB in particular play a positive role to construct an Inclusive Britain where all sections of our society can not only live in peace and harmony but also prosper together. Despite the challenges facing Muslims, 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 a plural Britain in recent decades. The history of Muslim link with Britain, however, goes back to early days of Islam. Ever since King Offa of Mercia (757CE) minted a gold coin with the Muslim creed *'there is no deity except Allah, Muhammad is the Messenger'* in Arabic on it, perhaps in recognition to his special relationship with the Muslim world, there has been a bumpy journey. But overall, the Muslim contribution to Britain has a rich pedigree and now, more than ever, it is important to ensure that it continues.

Working for the common good, not just the 'good of the Muslim community', had always been paramount on the MCB's list of priority. Our holy book, the Noble Qur'an, inspires us to: ***"Help one another to virtue and God-consciousness and do not help one another to sin and transgression."*** (*The Qur'an 5:2*). With this vision in mind the MCB has undertaken three tasks since its inception – 1) empowerment of the diverse Muslim communities through capacity building of their institutions, 2) encouraging Muslims to engage in socio- economic and political life of Britain, and 3) working for the betterment of Britain.

Given the socio-economic background of the evolving Muslim communities and multiple challenges faced by many of them in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7, the Muslim community has done remarkably well. Mainstreaming the diverse Muslim community has been MCB's most important priority. In just 10 years the MCB made its proud mark in some areas, often in collaboration with others. I will mention just a few here.

1. Towards the end of 1990s the MCB worked with faith communities and the government in bringing the faith question in the Census 2001 that now helps meeting essential needs of various communities. In the beginning of this century the MCB also worked with others in making the religious discrimination illegal in Britain.
2. The MCB built a strong partnership with the TUC committing the two organisations to jointly work to support workplace justice and to combat the threat of Islamophobia. In the last couple of years the MCB Secretary General spoke in the TUC Congress and TUC General Secretary addressed the MCB AGM. This has extended into MCB supporting UCU and NUS in their admirable policy of creating and sustaining positive environment in the Higher Education campuses.
3. The MCB partnered with some civil society organisations like Citizen's Organising Foundation (COF), human rights organisation like Liberty and international NGOs like Crisis Action on issues affecting liberty and rights of the citizens on the one hand and averting global conflicts and protecting civilians on the other.
4. The MCB is in the forefront of inter-faith work to help mutual understanding and respect between religions. This includes health care, hospital, prison and armed forces chaplaincy.
5. The MCB contributed to mainstream economy by encouraging Muslim investment to London from across the Muslim world through events such as Islamic finance and Trade Conferences. The halal or ethical mortgage is now becoming part of mainstream British economy.
6. The MCB contributed to London 2012 in various ways. The MCB helped in its bidding process in 2005 by advocating with Muslim diplomats in London.

The values of community life and the need to build strong communities on mutual support are basic principles that connect Muslims to their fellow citizens. From our diverse backgrounds and beliefs we have worked together to achieve a better Britain for

everyone. Collectively we need to stand in support of one another when our religious beliefs are undermined or our practices are ridiculed. Contrary to assertions that religions have been used to foster hatred, the essential message of all religions is the unity of humankind and its potential as a positive force for harmony and cooperation is age-old. I can mention one particular verse of the Qur'an that 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.” (Quran 49:14)

Human beings are like multi-coloured flowers that make this earth attractive. This is the essence of unity in diversity. However, by diversity 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 pluralism is in some respects a by-product of Britain's 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. The post-war Britain was built on this construct and we were all happy to extol the virtues of this diversity.

Sadly, the 9/11 and 7/7 attacks have influenced events. The Muslim community has been tarred with negative image and seen by many in the prism of security. This has manifested itself in sections of our tabloids and broadsheets, on our airwaves and corridors of political power. Volleys of 'anti-terrorism' laws were passed and numerous polls were carried out that created a climate of suspicion and fear surrounding the community. This drip-feed of disparagement about Muslims has been affecting ordinary people in the street and proving counter-productive in community harmony. A single narrative is being imposed on the Muslim community to undermine their confidence and scare people. With so much diversity in the Muslim community, and some being in the bottom of the socio-economic indicators, this is proving daunting to many Muslims.

The features of the current debate have narrowly focused on British Muslims, young Muslims in particular, and their alleged inability to integrate with the rest of society. The

issue is much wider and more complex than that. Integration and cohesion involve emotional attachment of communities, particularly the young - be they Muslim, Christian, Jew, Hindu, Sikh or otherwise, black, white or brown. Conflating community cohesion with 'violent extremism' or terrorism is the last thing we need, as this is counter-productive and seen as political point scoring. The agenda of community cohesion cannot be imposed from the top down: whether that be from government, mosques, churches, synagogues or the community leadership. All of us have a role, but if we pander to the headlines that pressurise people, we can expect a backlash and unsatisfactory results, particularly from the youth.

It is young people, more than people like me, who will draw more widely from the varying cultural heritages from different parts of the world. They will pick and mix. They will go beyond the usual Euro-centric approach of looking at things. For instance – what is the Muslim contribution to the arts, science and literature in British culture? Similarly, where do other communities fit in? In an inter-connected world we cannot fail to include all people. Britain has shown its resilience in the aftermath of 7/7 atrocities where all its citizens stood shoulder to shoulder in solidarity with each other, looking to our collective security to forge a future together.

As Britain's Muslims are a young and budding community an optimistic future lies ahead for all of us. More than one third Muslims are under the age of 16. 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 spite of differing views on some political and international issues, ethnic and faith communities have learnt to live together with shared values and hopes and concerns of civic life - such as breakdown of family, upbringing of children, looking after the elderly, school discipline, anti-social behaviour, freedom of expressions, economic well being, healthy living, security and law and order, etc. The glass has to be half full.

Islam teaches us of our unilateral obligation to work for the common good of all. The Muslim Council of Britain wants to remain a vanguard of this teaching and practice in Britain. Thank you.