

IAW launch speech by Sarah Joseph

Thirteen years ago I became drawn to the simple faith of Islam: "believe in God and thereafter be upright". Little did I know then that that decision would lead me to the life it has. A life, where for at least ten of those years, I have been asked to explain my faith and articulate its message of peace and justice.

I have never ever felt that there is a conflict with me as a Briton and me as a Muslim. God made me English, and I don't question His motives for doing so. As an English woman, I grew up knowing my rights and my duties, and I feel an intense sense of social obligation towards my community and my society, which my faith enhances and increases.

Yet so easily, my loyalty to my country and my fellow countrymen are called into question. Indeed my very "right" to be here is called into question. The less well educated offer the suggestion that I "bleep off back to my own country"; some broadsheet columnists and commentators politely suggest I abandon any emotional feelings to people of my shared faith for to do otherwise makes me a fifth columnist, then they witter on about Briton as my "host" country.

Briton does not "host" me - this is my home... I am no guest. [My family have been here for generations, fought in our wars on land and sea, have dressed the ladies at Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and survived the sinking of the Titanic.] The daffodils and tulips of Spring; the roses and lavender of Summer, the very shade of light and the crispness of the air are imbedded in my subliminal consciousness so that England is the only place I can ever imagine calling home. I have travelled the world and cannot imagine living anywhere else, indeed nowhere am I more English than when I am abroad! Although I know God created the whole world, He chose that I will always be an English woman wherever I may roam.

But my religious faith is Islam, and Islam is perceived as foreign and a thing apart. It is not foreign - well, only as foreign to these shores as Christianity once was - for both faiths emanate from the same part of the world, come from the same God and hold to the same Prophets.

Many of my fellow countrymen have chosen the same path as I, both now and in the past. I think of William Henry Abdullah Quilliam a Liverpoolian solicitor who embraced Islam in 1887. He headed a fine and active Muslim community in Liverpool - mainly of converts. I think of Lord Headley Al Faruq, not the first, but the THIRD peer to embrace Islam, however his was the most public conversion, and caused quite a sensation in 1913! I mention these gentlemen because they were English Muslims from over a 100 years ago. They were not quiet wall flowers, indeed they did not always agree with the decisions of the day and spoke out when they felt they had to, but their dignity and position as Englishmen were never brought into question.

Islam Awareness Week has been going for 7 years now, the activities of groups such as the Islamic Society of Britain have been going still longer. It is not the type of work that grabs headlines: it's not aggressive enough! But it involves hundreds of ordinary Muslims giving up time and energy to tell ordinary people about their faith. This work goes on in local libraries, town halls and school halls, people's homes and the High Street, and never before has this work seemed more urgent, more pressing, more important.

The recent events have drawn Islam once again into the spotlight. Our papers and our televisions show us pictures of angry men with placards, angry men with beards, angry men with turbans, angry men with guns, oppressed women in burkhas, oppressed women - silent. The current crisis is being billed as Islam versus Christianity.

These images and this billing are so far removed from the message of Islam which I know and love that sometimes it is hard to bear.

This whole mess - it is not Islam versus Judaism. Moses went to Pharaoh and asked him to set his people free. He demanded of the powerful Pharaoh that his civilisation not be built on the backs of slaves. He spoke for the poor, the weak, the disposed and the oppressed. His message is in the Qur'an.

This is not Islam versus Christianity. Jesus Christ came to the lost sheep of the children of the house of Israel. He spoke for the poor, the weak, the disposed and the oppressed. His message is in the Qur'an.

This is the message of Islam. Islam and consequently Muslims will always speak for the poor, the weak, the disposed and the oppressed. A quality I find in my fellow Englishmen who are renowned for speaking up for the under-dog!

Whoever oppresses, even if they claim to be a Muslim, the Qur'anic message stands against them. Islam is versus those who oppress, who spread tyranny, who dispossess, who mis-use power - in the name of freedom or in the name of God.

Islam is versus any who act only out of self-interest, whoever they may be.

The Qur'an demands "be just: even if it be against yourself, for justice is closest to God consciousness."

This would seem to be a powerful message for all human beings - as we face the issues of the present crisis, and as a principle for the future. We all want peace, and if we are to attain it, be sure that peace has to be built on the foundation of justice.