CONTEXTUALISING ISLAM IN BRITAIN PHASE II

Symposium 1: The Individual and Community

1.1: Defining the Individual
- How is the individual defined within Islamic intellectual traditions?
- If it is possible to generalise, how does this idea differ from, or how is it similar to, the liberal conception of the individual? Are Muslims necessarily communitarian?
- Are the differences important, and if so, why are they?
- What is at stake in emphasising the compatibility between these two conceptions?
- it is there a need to rebalance the emphasis in Islamic law, ethics, theology, philosophy and spirituality towards the individual?

1.2: The Individual, liberty and rights
- How is the idea of the individual linked in Islamic intellectual traditions to the concepts of (i) free will, and (ii) moral agency?
- Is there an Islamic frame of reference for the ideas of personal freedom, individual conscience, liberty and autonomy?
- How far can the idea of the individual be linked with or be used to ground human rights?
- Are human rights universal and inalienable according to Islam?
- Can Islamic law and ethics address all of humanity or does it address believers alone?
- What implications do these considerations have towards how Muslims view the moral agency and goodness of non-Muslims?
- Are Muslim virtue ethics too theoretical to apply to practical problems? Is there a basic fissure between ethics and *fiqhi* realities?

1.3: Authority, Consensus, Community
- Does an authoritarian conception of religious authority, community consensus and family control vitiate individual autonomy and freedom?
- Can a legitimate space of alternative views and dissent not only be affirmed, but endorsed as a necessary good in itself? Is difference above and beyond the narrow confines of juristic opinion in secondary issues a good?
- How does freedom and dissent relate to concepts like the search for consensus and the idea of fostering unity?
- How much does authoritarianism play into intergenerational change and cultural conflict in British Muslim communities?
- How does radicalism of all kinds relate to freedom and autonomy or conversely to authoritarianism?

1.4: Defining the Community in a Secular Age
- Is the Muslim presence best described as "a community", or in more plural terms as "a community of communities"?
- What is a Muslim community in the context of liberal secular democracy in theological terms? An ideal, a structure, a network, a set of institutions, a means to reproduce values etc?
- What are communal rights? If so, how do they work in this political and social context?

- How are communal and individual rights balanced within Islam?
- And how does that balance in Islamic thought interact with human rights discourse and liberal theory of individual autonomy?
- Is the "community good" inherently a conservative notion?
- How does "the community good" relate to "the public or common good", the individual good or the good, however so defined, of the umma?
- How does the notion of "community" relate to the idea of the neighbour in Islam, and to the idea of citizenship?

Symposium 2: Family and Education

2.1: Defining the Family
- What is the theological status of the family in Islam?
- Is the value of "family" related to particular social forms of the family, e.g. nuclear, extended, clan, patrilineal etc. ?
- Does the family uniquely embody certain Islamic virtues?
- What social, economic and political, religious and other factors shape the institution of the family in British Muslim communities today?
- What state of health is that institution in presently? As it is experiencing radical transformation in many circumstances what are the core essential features of Muslim family life that should be preserved and strengthened, e.g. mutuality, the reproduction of values (*tarbiyah*), language and culture, networks of support etc. What can be discarded?
- Is it right to assume that shedding homeland cultures is an unqualified good?
- What form should *tarbiyah* take in liberal society where freedom and individual autonomy are so central?
- Should *tarbiyah* be expressed more in terms of rights than in terms of duties?

2.2: Muslim Educational Institutions
- How well are informal and formal British Muslim educational institutions (the family, the supplementary school, the faith school, the religious movements etc.) performing?
- What is the relationship between secular and religious education?
- Are they creating open or foreclosed religious identities?
- What critical assessment might be made of the curricula available in these institutions?
- Is all the political attention around Muslim education entirely unjustified or are there grounds for taking some of this criticism on board?
- How far should a new Muslim pedagogical method be developed that promotes critical thinking, rationality and hermeneutics at the core of Muslim thinking and Muslim identity formation?
- What role is there for critical thinking, rationality, and hermeneutics within Muslim pedagogies?
- What role should science and empiricism play in these curricula? Or creativity and cultural expression in the arts and music?

2.3: Sex and Relationships Education

- How effective is sex and relationship education in our communities? Who delivers it?
- What are the roles of the family, informal religious education and schools in fostering healthy attitudes?
- What sort of sex and relationship education do we need to promote to deal with relationship and family breakdowns and other forms of dissonance?
- If we believe that the family as a basic unit in society is a good, how do we promote and understand this and inculcate values across the generations?
- What examples of best practice can we share in this area?

Symposium 3: Political Participation and Community

3.1: Community Activism

- How far should our traditions of community activism and its relationship with mainstream political participation be critically revisited?
- Is there a balance between the public good and the Muslim good, and if so, what is it?
- How much does Muslim activism really differ from ethnic activism within Muslim communities?
- What political role should community institutions like mosques and representative organisations realistically be expected to play? How should we view the development of organisations such as Mosques And Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB)?
- How far should the secular argument that politics based on religious identity can be divisive be taken on board?

3.2: The Secular Public Space Revisited

- What do we understand by the secular public space?
- To what extent is the commitment to the secular public space conditional?
- What is the role of the Muslim voice in modern Britain? Does this differ from the function of the Established Church, or other religious voices?
- Do Muslims only have natural allies among other faiths, or can secular trends also present common interests?
- How do we address the growing problems of bigotry and Islamophobia that raise new barriers in engaging in the secular public space?
- How can we move Muslim public theology in Britain to be broader than a counter-terrorism agenda and strategy?

3.3: Engaging in Party politics

- How far have these traditions been able to balance out community mobilisation through identity politics with participation in mainstream politics?
- Is it more realistic to acknowledge that Muslim politics and mainstream British politics will always have a dynamic, sometimes confrontational relationship?
- What role can Muslims in mainstream politics play in a post-Prevent world?

Symposium 4: Gender – Equality, Identity and Sexuality

4.1: Justice and Equality
- What resources within the Islamic intellectual traditions are there to respond to claims of gender justice: equal rights for Muslim women to education, work, political participation, leadership within the core religious and community institutions, within the family, and so on?
- How much are these fundamental claims to equality with men denied to British Muslim women within families and communities, even if they are upheld in law?

4.2: Feminism and Theology
- What grounds are there for an Islamic feminism? Are there grounds for an Islamic feminist theology?
- What strategies can one adopt towards a hermeneutics of equity and fairness?
- Has much of classical and contemporary Islamic scholarship is informed by patriarchal and even misogynist assumptions that need to be challenged? Has patriarchal thinking undermined the Qur'anic principle of equality?
- How much have verses in the Qur'an that talk about gender difference been used to shore up male privilege? Is 4.34 a statement of male responsibility rather than of male privilege and superiority? [Meaning of the verse in translation (Yusuf Ali): *Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their, beds (and last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): for Allah is Most High, Great (above you all).*]
- How far have British Muslims been influenced by the development of Islamic feminism, as opposed to the much earlier secular nationalist feminism, in the Muslim world from the 1990s onwards?

4.3: A Gender-Facing Jurisprudence
- How does a theology and jurisprudence based on gender equality instead of patriarchy relate to issues such as (i) marriage and divorce, (ii) the role of women within marriage and the extended family, (iii) so-called "honour" killings, (iv) opportunities in employment and education, (v) inheritance laws, (vi) the nature of social roles of women in family life, (vii) sex and intimacy in marriage, and the concept of "marital rape", (viii) domestic violence, (viii) cliterodectomy, (ix) full participation and role in governance and leadership of congregations, community institutions and structures and so on.

4.4: Gender is also about men
- How is the idea of masculinity within Islamic thought to be reassessed if the notion of patriarchy is critically assessed?
- Should the social role of masculinity in Islam be defined largely by economic responsibility to the family or more generally to the notion of control and authority? If so, are such concepts meaningful today?

<u>4.5: Gender Relations</u>
- How is the relationship between men and women defined in Islam? Equality, reciprocity, duty, right, service, ihsan, virtue? In family, marriage, community, society, work, public life, culture and the arts, in the mosques and community organisations?
- Is gender biologically determined or social (and juristically) constructed?
- Should these relations be defined by gender equality or gender difference?
- Can difference and equality be combined in any meaningful sense or are they fundamentally incompatible?

<u>4.6: Sexual Orientation</u>
- How far should the Qur'an, the Prophetic tradition and the schools of Islamic law be revisited critically to reassess issues of sexual orientation?
- How relevant are arguments about the ground of values ("natural" law or a command theology) in relation to sexual orientation?
- Is the Muslim notion of family at odds with stable and long-term same sex relationships?
- Should Muslims today imbibe uncritically the shift from acts to public identities, i.e. there was no such identity as "homosexual" in pre-modern Muslim societies?
- Does that distinction between acts and identities enable a more tolerant and compassionate approach to this issue?
- How should British Muslims deal responsibly and compassionately with gay Muslims and gay Muslim groups, rather than rendering them invisible and ignoring their issues about discrimination and bad treatment with the community?
- How far should British Muslims recognise that the denial of gay rights can fall foul of discrimination law and is driving new forms of right-wing anti-Muslim politics across Europe? How feasible is public advocacy for Muslim rights to equality and recognition while denying the same to gay people?