

CONTEXTUALISING  
ISLAM IN BRITAIN:  
EXPLORATORY PERSPECTIVES

PROJECT LEADER  
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## *Foreword*

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### **MUSTAFA CERİĆ, GRAND MUFTI OF BOSNIA**

The fascinating work done by the members of this project comes at a vitally important time. Never before in the modern European world has Islam been the focus of such pressing and widespread attention and interest. This situation represents both an opportunity and a challenge. It is an opportunity, of course, for Muslims to share their faith and live up to the ethical values articulated in the Holy Quran and passed down from Prophet Muhammad (Peace and blessings of God be upon him). But it is also a challenge, for Europeans everywhere, to safeguard the hard-won freedoms which should allow everyone to live with mutual respect according to their beliefs and to contribute positively to the public sphere in an open and tolerant atmosphere.

As the members of this project note, Islam has long been part of the fabric of society – not just in Britain but across Europe too. Over the centuries, Muslims have contributed, and continue to contribute, in many ways – spiritual, ethical, intellectual, social, economic and political – to help make Europe what it is today and what it can become tomorrow. Understanding and building upon the contributions of all communities must be the basis of a peaceful, just, harmonious and prosperous society. But in the midst of these contributions, there are always questions that need to be posed and re-posed. What does it mean to live fully and faithfully as a Muslim in a multicultural society such as Britain? What can Muslims contribute to discourses about pluralistic society and human rights, which are such a central part of the contemporary British and wider European contexts? What does Islam have to say about pressing issues in current debates that concern wider society, such as shared values and participative citizenship?

This report tackles these issues with great wisdom, boldness and insight. Always starting from the moral and spiritual vision of the Qur'an, the group asks how this vision can inform and enrich the modern British context. They express a strong and enduring commitment to pluralism – after all, the Qur'an itself recognizes the existence of other religions and endorses diversity as part of the divine vision. The group also argues for the importance of religious freedom and in particular the free expression of religious voices in the public sphere. They stress too the importance of active and positive political engagement – through local and national democratic structures, campaigning, writing, and other forms of peaceful and lawful expression – to work for a better future for all.

This project is a unique and bold enterprise that has creatively harnessed the wide diversity of the British Muslim community and turned it into a dynamic benefit, not just for British Muslims, but I hope more widely too. The report which you have in front of you is the fruit of many hours of searching debate, discussion and dialogue. It addresses many of the most important and topical issues facing the British Muslim community today. As such, it will also speak to similar debates in a wider European context. I therefore congratulate and thank those involved – the members of the project, and the stewardship of the University of Cambridge. Most of all, I warmly commend this report to you, the reader, in the hope that you also will draw a benefit from it and use it as a base for building bridges of mutual respect and understanding between all communities in our increasingly plural societies.

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## *Preface*

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### **YASIR SULEIMAN**

This report represents the culmination of a project that began more than a year ago. The aim was simple: to create an independent and open space within which scholars, activists, community leaders and academics from across Britain's Muslim communities could come together to debate a central question: what does it mean to live faithfully as a Muslim in Britain today?

The group that we convened brought many perspectives to bear on this question, drawn as it was from a wide range of Islamic theological and legal backgrounds, as well as from different ethnic communities and geographical areas from within the UK. What made this group particularly special was that, from the outset, everyone agreed that this diversity was a great asset: that the expression of different views within the British Muslim community was not a weakness but rather a strength and a sign of its vitality.

As our discussions developed, the group engaged and debated a range of topics. The simple question about living in multicultural, plural and 'secular' Britain soon developed into a range of related issues: what are the different meanings that 'secular' can have, and how are these contested? What does the Qur'anic commitment to pluralism mean in our current context? What is the relationship between the overall objectives of the Shari'ah and the political and ethical vision expressed in international human rights instruments? Another important area of discussion was about citizenship. What do Islamic traditions have to say about citizenship, and how might Muslim scholarship develop this notion further? How are discourses about citizenship created in Britain today? What does or should active citizenship imply, and what might the barriers be to accepting these discourses?

These issues were debated in an atmosphere of respect and goodwill. Underlying our discussions there was a genuine appreciation of the benefits that dialogue can bring. While no-one sought to impose any set of views, a consensus emerged naturally on many issues. The group stressed the importance of allowing the free expression of religious voices in the public sphere, and expressed strong support for an accommodative approach by the state in religious matters. It agreed on the importance of political engagement through democratic channels and the need to strengthen civil society institutions as well as the legitimacy of secular democracy as a framework within which to hold power to account. In our discussions about active citizenship, we discussed the ethical responsibilities of citizens in relation to the Qur'anic notion of human beings as vicegerents of God. We also noted the need to strengthen capacity to deliver Islamic citizenship education programmes, building on the excellent work that is already being done.

A fuller list of conclusions can be found at the end of this report. Inevitably, given the range of topics we covered, not everyone in the group agreed with every point made or recorded in the report. Therefore, no particular individual in the group should be associated with all of the views expressed in this document.

My thanks and appreciation go to the members of the Steering Group, who were instrumental in developing this project from the outset, supporting its implementation, and providing wise guidance and insight throughout. The work of this group was also made possible, and pleasurable, by the commitment, expertise and organisational talent of Sophie Anderson and Emma Wells from the HRH Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre for Islamic Studies at Cambridge. My appreciation also goes to the staff of the Møller Centre in Cambridge, who made our repeated visits and seminars there so productive and comfortable, and to Shiraz Khan for designing the report with efficiency and speed.

Finally, I would like to record my sincerest thanks to Paul Anderson for his work on producing the report. I am sure I can speak on behalf of the whole group in thanking Paul for his commitment to the project, his meticulous drafting of several versions of the report, the expertise with which he moulded our discussions and comments on the various drafts into a coherent set of ideas, and the clarity which he attained in expressing them in these pages.



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## *Executive Summary*

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### **The Nature of the Project**

The overall vision of this project is to create an opportunity for different parts of the British Muslim community to come together to discuss what it means to live as a Muslim in modern Britain. One particular aim is to explore how Islamic theologies and Muslim communities might contribute to notions of active citizenship, civic responsibility and engagement in wider society. Another rationale for the project is that British Muslims are growing up in a country that is increasingly secular and need faith-based guidance on a range of real-life issues that they face on a daily basis.

The project has brought together a group of Muslim scholars, academics and activists with a diverse spectrum of views from across Muslim communities in the UK. While it is funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government, the project is hosted by the University of Cambridge and its direction is independent and autonomous of both government and university.

### **Social and Demographic Contexts**

Largely because of post-war migration, the British Muslim community has grown from some twenty thousand in 1950 to around 2 million at present, or about 3% of the population. Muslims are the largest religious minority in Britain, accounting for just over half of the country's non-Christian religious population. Great ethnic and theological diversity can be found in British Muslim communities. In fact, there are communities within communities, each containing a multitude of different talents and needs. Within these communities, there is a mixture of success stories alongside instances of relative deprivation. Whilst the vast majority of Muslims live peacefully with their neighbours, there is a very small group of British Muslims who have been

engaged in acts of terrorism. While radicalisation as a whole is still not well-understood, it is argued that violent extremism is at root a social and political phenomenon, rather than an intrinsically religious one.

### **The Political Context: Secularism**

Britain is often said to be a secular society that is characterized by an ethos of liberalism. However, the term “secularism” covers a range of different political philosophies. The group discussed the different meanings of these terms, and the extent to which they could be considered compatible with the Qur’an. The group affirmed its support for procedural secularism – allowing all voices, religious or otherwise, to be heard in the public square – noting that it provides many benefits for British Muslims and allows Islam to be practised freely. However, the group expressed concern about the dangers of ideological secularism, which seeks to deny the legitimacy of religious voices in the public sphere.

There was a discussion of the way “divine sovereignty” had been understood and propounded by some thinkers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These thinkers argued that an Islamic state is only valid if God’s sovereignty is manifested through the incorporation of the Shari‘ah, with its appointed guardians retaining a central vetoing power in a modern state structure. In practice, this notion could be used by a single individual or group to claim divine authority and act undemocratically. Some of the most prominent and respected figures in Islamic history argued against such a conception of political authority. The implication of their positions is that the state should not claim divine authority but should be held accountable to universal standards through the free operation of the religious conscience.

The group therefore stressed the importance of holding power to account according to standards which are common to the Islamic tradition, and emphasized the legitimacy of secular democracy as a means of doing this. The group concluded that Britain’s traditions of upholding fundamental freedoms and of non-interference in the religious lives of its citizens should provide room for everyone, including Muslims, to practice their faith in an atmosphere of respect, security and dignity.

Far from advocating withdrawal from society, mainstream current Islamic scholarship regards political engagement as an obligation on Muslim citizens.<sup>1</sup> While voting is not a legal obligation, it should be very strongly encouraged. However, voting is only one form of active political engagement. In general it is incumbent on Muslims to be involved in public life at all levels: to seek justice and the common good, whether

<sup>1</sup> See references on page 37.

through grassroots campaigns, through writing and scholarship, or through standing for election to local councils and Parliament.

It is also important to acknowledge that, in Muslim-minority countries, the Shari‘ah has undergone an “ethical turn”. In other words, for Muslims living as a minority in a secular liberal democracy, applying the Shari‘ah is a matter of personal conscience or communal moral suasion rather than legal sanction. This is consistent with the way that Muslims have lived in non-Muslim majority countries throughout the centuries. There is no obligation for Muslims living in these contexts to strive against the wishes of their non-Muslim neighbours to implement what some view as the full legal sanction of the Shari‘ah.

### **Pluralism**

As with secularism, the group discussed the meanings and implications of pluralism, and the compatibility of these notions with Islam. The Qur’an recognises the existence of different religions, and divinely ordains diversity in all its forms, whether religious, ethnic or linguistic. Within this context it calls on Muslims to respect the brotherhood of humanity, and to promote the common good. Different communities are urged to “vie with each other in doing good” (Qur’an 5:48). The group agreed that Muslims should assert and teach what they see to be the truth of their faith while recognising the right of others to do the same. Pluralism in this sense does not mean that Muslims are required to regard other faiths and belief systems as equally true in the theological sense, but they should accept them and their followers as equally respected in our pluralist society.

The group discussed the mindset and language of “*takfir*”, which draws a sharp and oppositional difference between those whom a group considers to be true believers, and the rest of society. This mindset is often a symptom of withdrawal from society, usually accompanied by a sense of disempowerment within mainstream society. The group considered that the distinction between believer and unbeliever is important in matters of doctrine and worship, but not helpful in matters of social interaction or when talking about issues of the common good in society.

The Qur’anic message warning Muslims against colluding or associating with enemies at times of war (see Qur’an 3:28), which is a common sense requirement for any society, has been misinterpreted by some to argue that Muslims should avoid friendly contact with non-Muslims. The Qur’an is very explicit in affirming that this warning does not apply to “those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes” (Qur’an 60:8).

Rather than concentrating on difference, it is important to focus on issues of commonality – identifying shared values and principles between Islam and other worldviews. In practice, this means articulating a kind of civic morality that identifies how to treat others well: affirming mutual respect, and not discriminating against others. Muslims should treat non-Muslim individuals as equal in the domain of social interaction, regardless of religious or doctrinal disagreements. The starting point for building this framework, from the Islamic point of view, is the body of principles outlined in the Qur'an and Islamic traditions, including good neighbourliness, charity, hospitality, non-aggression, honouring of commitments and competing in doing good.

At the same time, it is important to be able to teach and assert the 'truth' of Islam in public in the same way that other religions are able to do. For many Muslims it is vital to ensure that the thinking of young Muslims, their development and values, are rooted in the teachings of the Qur'an. Muslims have a duty to safeguard the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) and should not feel that they need to compromise this.

### **The Shari'ah and Human Rights**

Islam is fundamentally concerned with ethics – the right way to live. Islamic ethical and legal teachings place a strong emphasis on traditional moral values such as love, kindness, generosity, patience and justice. The Shari'ah – or the Islamic path of moral living – provides a comprehensive system of ethical education that should be the central focus of teaching Islam to Muslim children. However, it is important to teach Islam in a way that speaks to the reality of people's lives. Current structures in Muslim communities are often not well-equipped to do this and this is an area that needs further attention.

Many non-Muslims, and Muslims, tend to have a skewed understanding of the term Shari'ah, which conjures up images of floggings and beheadings. However, this is simply one historic interpretation of one aspect of the Shari'ah: the *hudud*, or the penal code for public crimes. The Shari'ah as a whole is much more than that – it is a way of life, based on an ethical code that seeks to serve both a Creator God and His creation.

In fact, there is a great deal in common between human rights declarations and the underlying objectives of the Shari'ah (*maqasid al-Shari'ah*), which seek to establish dignity, equity and justice for all. Islam forbids abuses and crimes such as forced marriages of men and women, domestic violence, female genital mutilation and

so-called “honour killings”, and teaches the equality of all human beings regardless of gender.

Muslims of course believe that their commitment to ethical values is first and foremost derived from the Qur’an, and the *hadith*.<sup>2</sup> The belief that religion is good for society, and there is a legitimate place for religion in society needs theological underpinning. The challenge is to do this while being clear that one aspires to and believes in the same values (such as compassion and serving others) as the majority.

<sup>2</sup> *Hadith*: the reports of what Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) said or did.

## Active Citizenship

Islamic teachings recognise the notion of the social contract between the individual citizen and the state, and emphasise the importance of respecting the contractual obligations one has entered into. Islamic teachings also recognize the naturalness of love of one’s country, or patriotism, that may feed into an active commitment to make a positive difference as a citizen.

The Qur’an also provides a strong basis for active citizenship. The Muslim belief that humans are created as vicegerents of God places responsibilities on humans to develop good moral character and to engage with society in a positive way. The Qur’anic advice to “encourage the good and speak against what is wrong” also means that active citizenship entails influencing, questioning and challenging the state when it fails to uphold its own principles of justice. Muslims also need to engage politically in the legislative process to articulate their own visions and values.

When developing discourses about citizenship, it is important to emphasise responsibilities as well as rights. Contributing to the welfare of others, through *zakah*,<sup>3</sup> is not an option but an obligation in Islam. Beyond this, there are many ways to contribute to one’s community. Performing *khidmah* (service) is a central Islamic value that motivates many Muslims. However, this is often understood in narrow terms such as contributing to the mosque. In reality, *khidmah* is an inclusive concept that needs to be applied to wider society beyond the walls of the mosque. There are many forms that social and civic engagement can take, and these can draw on the immense energy and talent of the British Muslim population.

<sup>3</sup> *Zakah* means the charitable alms prescribed by Islam.

Over the past twenty years, there has been valuable Muslim scholarship on issues such as citizenship, identity and belonging, the social contract, civic engagement and responsibilities, and relations with the rest of society. But although the ideas have been elaborated, a stronger institutional framework is needed to deliver them. There are some excellent Islamic citizenship education programmes, but more are

needed. These programmes should aim to translate the wisdom of the Islamic sources into an idiom and a context that speaks to the reality of people's lives.

## **Jihad**

Jihad in its true sense is a key part of active citizenship. It means a positive ethical struggle: for example, striving for social justice, fighting against poverty, or making efforts to reform oneself. Jihad has recently been the subject of intense debate, partly because of the abhorrent misrepresentations promoted by some misguided groups from Muslim communities.

In some, stringently defined, circumstances, jihad means the legitimate use of force to defend oneself. However, it is important to stress that Islam is opposed to all forms of terrorism, regardless of who sponsors them. While all legal systems recognize self-defence as a legitimate rationale for the use of force, it is clear that foreign conflicts cannot justify violence in Britain. The geographical and historical context to some Qur'anic verses, such as those that mention violence, need to be explained so that the verses are understood in the context within which they were revealed.

There are many ways to respond to oppression other than by fighting. While there are strong emotions about certain foreign conflicts and political situations, due to the secular, pluralist and democratic nature of modern Britain, the struggle against injustice can take many forms, such as lobbying, activism, and writing. British Muslims should take advantage of these opportunities. This is part of what it means to be a good citizen – but will only become a reality when backed up by education, access to resources, and the self-confidence that these enable.

## INTRODUCTION:

# *Contextualising Islam*

### **Nature of the Project**

The overall vision of this project is to create an opportunity for different parts of the British Muslim community to come together to discuss what it means to live faithfully as a Muslim in modern Britain. The project arose out of a desire, expressed by Muslim academics, activists and theologians in meetings with Government, to formulate and address this topic in an independent and faith-inspired way. The project provided a free intra-Muslim space for thinking openly and raising questions about being and belonging in Britain without any outside interference.

The religion of Islam was established fifteen centuries ago, with the revelation of the Qur'an to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him). First and foremost, Islam consists of a faith in God (*iman*), and is a call to cultivate moral excellence (*ihsan*) in one's attitudes and actions. It is a comprehensive vision of how to lead a good life, that emphasises spiritual and moral values, social obligations to others, and individual responsibility. Muslims envision/conceive of Islam not as a wholly new body of religious teachings, but as the continuation of revelation from God to humanity which has occurred throughout the ages.

Since the founding of Islam, Muslim communities have developed and flourished across the world in a variety of different social, economic and political contexts. Islamic theology and jurisprudence have developed as Muslim scholars, jurists and thinkers responded to the various practical and spiritual questions that their communities faced. These responses are based primarily on foundational religious texts: the Qur'an, and reports (or *hadith*) of what Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) said or did.

The current project did not seek to rewrite any of these rich theological and legal traditions that are the common heritage of Muslims worldwide. It was not construed as a “theology board” but as a research project that aims to help Muslims to think further about what it means to live in a modern British context. The project started from two convictions: that the foundational texts of Islam are sacred; and that the ways in which Islam has been practised and its theologies understood have evolved over the centuries in a variety of different cultures and environments. Muslim communities are as plural and diverse as the contexts in which they live, but they are brought together by certain sacred and unchanging aspects of the Islamic faith.

The project is called “contextualising Islam” since it is an attempt to understand Islam – understood both as a religious text and as a variety of social realities or “texts” – within the context of British society. It brought together Muslim scholars, academics and activists with a diverse spectrum of views from across Muslim communities in the UK. The meetings were characterised by open and frank discussion, good humour, and a spirit of goodwill. Inevitably, given the range of issues discussed, a diversity of views was expressed. All members of the group saw this diversity as strength, and as the sign of a strong and vital community. The Muslim presence in Britain is not a singular presence, and it is important to hold this diversity constantly in mind.

One particular aim of the project, which crystallised in the course of the discussions, is to explore how Islamic theology and Muslim communities might contribute to notions of active citizenship, civic responsibility and engagement in wider society as well. The starting point is that these are fundamentally Islamic values and practices, and that these values are of relevance not only to Muslims but to wider society too. Part of the aim of the project is therefore to speak to wider debates on citizenship, especially given that Islam is now a well-established part of British society. Indeed, this project is part of a broader context of debate within British society about shared values, and the place of faith-based perspectives on morality and public policy.

### **Independence of the Project**

Although the project was supported by funding from the Department for Communities and Local Government, the final selection of participants and the drafting of the items for discussion was solely the responsibility of the University of Cambridge, the Project Steering Group and the participants themselves. The general framework of the project was loose enough for the agenda to be set and modified from within the group as discussions developed. The only parameters for selecting members of



the group were that they should reflect a diversity of backgrounds within the British Muslim community, as well as of age, gender and geographical region.

The project was led by the University of Cambridge – in conjunction with the Universities of Exeter and Westminster – which won a bid from the Department for Communities and Local Government in June 2008. The project aimed not to reach recommendations or decisions but rather to help stimulate a process of deliberation upon which future projects may draw. We hope that this work can encourage further debate and exchange.

Some participants initially questioned whether a university setting was the best forum for this kind of work, given the perception in some parts of the Muslim community that universities are “unashamedly secular”. However, universities have a tradition of fostering all kinds of debate, including faith-based discussion. The participant universities and members of the group are strongly committed to the principles of academic freedom, and have always stressed that they would not allow the project to implement any particular agenda from outside the group.

Several members of the group initially expressed the suspicion with which the project has been viewed in some parts of the Muslim community. Some British Muslims are suspicious of it because it is publicly funded. Other members of the group commented on the broader context for the project, arguing that the wider attention currently being paid to Islam has come about for the wrong reasons: a false suspicion has been created that the tendency towards violent extremism is somehow inherent within the tenets of Islam. Within Britain, and Europe more generally, the tenets of Islam have become a mainstream concern in a way that they have not for other religions.

Whatever the broader suspicions that formed the context of the project, it offered the Muslim community an opportunity to deliberate about its faith in the British context, and thereby to aid community cohesion in Britain. The project has been a pioneering endeavour in that it brought together figures from diverse Muslim communities across the UK – with different theological and Islamic legal traditions, as well as various ethnicities and languages. There was a recognition among the group that the Muslim community faces a number of challenging issues that call for frank debate and discussion. All members of the project were called on to raise issues that they felt were important, and to reflect honestly on them, in their personal capacities as faithful Muslims.

By necessity, therefore, the project aimed at an honest interrogation of Islamic teachings in search of guidance that would help Muslims lead a faithful Muslim life in

<sup>4</sup> This and subsequent footnote translations of the Arabic text of the Qur'an are taken from *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an* by Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali. The translation of the verses referred to here reads: "And their purpose was to tempt thee away from that which We had revealed unto thee, to substitute in Our name something quite different; (in that case), behold! They would certainly have made thee (their) friend! And had We not given thee strength, thou wouldst nearly have inclined to them a little. In that case We should have made thee taste an equal portion (of punishment) in this life, and an equal portion in death: and moreover thou wouldst have found none to help thee against Us!" In his commentary on the Qur'an, Muhammad Asad explains that this relates to an offer of "compromise" made by the pagan Quraysh: "they demanded of the Prophet that he give some sort of recognition to their tribal deities and attribute this recognition to God; in return, they promised to recognise him as a prophet and to make him their leader. Naturally, the Prophet rejected this offer." (Asad, M. 2004. *The Message of the Qur'an*. Bath: The Book Foundation.)

Britain. That search for guidance in a new context does not imply the dilution or abandonment of Islamic teachings. In undertaking this task, it is important to avoid "playing to the gallery" in attempting to present Islam as something that it is not in order to please others or to conform. The Qur'an warns against this (17:73-75).<sup>4</sup> All members stressed that the fundamental tenets of Islam are universal, but that it is the Islamic duty of Muslims always to apply these principles appropriately according to the context.

### Perspectives on "Contextualising Islam"

Many members of the project stressed the importance of educating young Muslims in Islamic values. Indeed, the current debate about values is as central to Muslim concerns as it is in wider British society. Young British Muslims are growing up in a secular country and need guidance on a range of real-life issues that they face on a daily basis. These issues should be addressed from within the community rather than answers being imposed from the outside. It was suggested that the project should aim to provide a framework to answer the challenging questions regarding British and Muslim identity that young Muslims face.

Some participants argued that this means questioning aspects of the Muslim community's heritage. While the true values of Islam are universal and perennial, they need to be contextualised. This partly means demonstrating to Muslim children how the values implicit in British citizenship are relevant to them *as Muslims*. While many of these values – such as social responsibility, fair governance, and respect for individual rights – are values shared with the rest of society, it is important to relate them to Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings of God be upon him) life and teachings, in order to provide additional motivation and meaning for Muslim children. In this sense, the project aims to contextualise British citizenship within Islam, as much as to contextualise Islam within Britain.

Others noted that some Qur'anic verses are understood and lived differently in different parts of the world. Therefore, they argued that one aspect of "contextualising" should be to consider how to understand and apply these verses within a plural and multicultural British society. The geographical and historical context to some verses, such as those that mention violence against unbelievers, need to be understood and explained, while keeping all interpretations within the limits of orthodoxy, broadly defined, to ensure their efficacy and relevance.

Some saw contextualisation as a hermeneutical process: a question of working out a method of interpreting the textual sources of Islam. The starting point for the group

was to look at Islam as a global set of values, and to understand how these values are manifested in different local practices and contexts. There are certain defining matters that bring all Muslims together, but also significant things that differentiate Muslims from each other. In this sense, it was argued that there is a legitimate place for a European expression of Islam, and within that for a British expression of Islam.

While “contextualising” had different shades of meaning for different participants, many stressed that the need for contextualisation is hardly unique to the Islamic faith. It is a historical feature of all religions that they both influenced their surroundings and in some respects been moulded by them. This is an ongoing process that started in the earliest period of Islam, when Muslims moved from Makkah and Madinah to Syria and Persia and encountered different systems of law and administration. It is a process that has continued throughout the centuries up to the present day. The question, now as always, is how to find resonances between historical and existing practices, and to identify what can be included within the boundaries of Islam and what cannot.

The current project aims to contribute to this long and ongoing historical process. While the group was not established to issue Islamic legal opinions (*fatwas*), in many cases it has sought to identify Islamic values (such as justice, tolerance and mercy) and give its opinion on what these values entail in the British context. This project should not be seen as an attempt to deal with every pressing theological, social and political issue facing Muslim communities, rather it is a contribution to an ongoing debate.

Several members talked about the way that Islam is perceived in Britain. The portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media is often detrimental and unrepresentative, relying on uninformed, prejudiced or lunatic-fringe spokesmen. Islamophobic sentiments are all too often tolerated in the media. In this context, an important longer term goal for Muslim communities in Britain is to be seen as an integral part of society, not as something oriental or exotic that could be regarded as alien to society, or indeed as the inverse “mirror image” of Europe. As a matter of historical fact, Islam has been part of Europe almost since its inception. Today, Islam and Muslims are a living and breathing part of British society, deeply interwoven into its cultural fabric.



The group met five times between February and May 2009; each of the first four meetings was a two-day symposium, with the fifth and final meeting lasting a single day. Each meeting consisted of a series of presentations and wide-ranging discussions, based around the questions which are summarised in Appendix A. This report

aims to capture the gist of these presentations and discussions; it does not speak with one voice on every issue but rather reflects a diversity of views. Instead of aiming to provide a single flowing narrative, this report records the various points that arose in discussion, and groups them under a series of sub-headings. In order to facilitate open and free exchange of views, the discussion was held under Chatham House rules, which means that comments are not attributed to individual speakers in this report. Not everyone agreed with every point made. Therefore, no individual participant should be identified with any or all of the views expressed in this document.

<sup>5</sup> The *Dar al-Hikmah* was a renowned library and intellectual centre for research, translation and education in the humanities and sciences, that was based in Baghdad between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century. It brought together Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers.

We cannot emphasize enough that the project at this stage is open-ended: views in this document are intended as exploratory perspectives – not definitive conclusions. Indeed, many may disagree with these perspectives. They are invited to join the discussions, and work towards the establishment of a virtual “House of Wisdom” or *Dar al Hikmah* for British Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>5</sup> Our shared objective after all is to find the best way forward for our country.

<sup>6</sup> Available online at <http://www.islamicity.com/mosque/Surai.htm>

For ease of reference, excerpts from the Qur’an are translated in the footnotes. These translations are taken from *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an* by Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali.<sup>6</sup>

# *Islam in Britain: Demographic & Socio-Economics Contexts*

## **Demographic Context**

Contact between the UK and the Islamic world goes back for centuries. For example there has been a Yemeni community in Wales since the 1890s. However, the migration of Muslims (amongst others) to the UK after the Second World War is more significant for the current demography of Britain. This migration happened for economic reasons, initially as part of the post-war reconstruction of Britain. The UK Muslim community has grown from around 20,000 in 1950 to around 2 million today,<sup>7</sup> or about 3% of the population. Muslims are the largest religious minority in Britain, accounting for just over half of the country's non-Christian religious population. Overall, around half of the British Muslim population is under the age of twenty-five. This has implications for schooling and labour market needs.

<sup>7</sup> National Labour Force Survey, 2008

There is a great variety of ethnic and theological backgrounds in British Muslim communities. Most British Muslims are from a South Asian background, but others are from the Middle East, North Africa, South East Asia and elsewhere. Whereas Muslim communities in London and the larger cities tend to be multi-ethnic, in other areas there tends to be less ethnic diversity within the communities. Approximately one in three British Muslims has family links to the Azad Kashmir region, especially in Birmingham and Bradford.

## **Socio-Economic Contexts**

There are many success stories that can be told about the British Muslim community. These include contributions to public services in general, and the National Health Service in particular, where Muslims are over-represented among doctors and other health professionals. There are thirteen Muslim parliamentarians and over two

<sup>8</sup> The relevant OECD statistics for the UK indicate that a higher percentage of Muslims achieve a high level of education than non-Muslims, although more Muslims are also represented at the low level. (J. Henzell-Thomas, *Introduction to the Working Session on Youth and Education: Roundtable discussion with the NGOs addressing Intolerance and Discrimination against Muslims*, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), Vienna, 17 December 2008).

<sup>9</sup> See Lindley, J. 2002. "Race or religion? The impact of religion on the employment and earnings of Britain's ethnic communities." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 28(3): 427-42. See also Brown, M.S. 2000. "Religion and economic activity in the South Asian population." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23(6):1035-61.

<sup>10</sup> See Sellick, P. 2004. *Muslim Housing Experiences*. London: Housing Corporation and Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies. Also: Ratcliffe, P. 1999. "Housing inequality and 'race': some critical reflections on the concept of 'social exclusion'." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 22(1):1-22.

<sup>11</sup> This can be seen in data from the Home Office Citizenship (2007) survey as well as recent research by Gallup-Coexist – <http://www.muslimwest-facts.com/mwf/118249/Gallup-Coexist-Index-2009.aspx>, 22(1):1-22.

hundred Muslim councillors. There are over 130 Muslim schools in the UK, eleven of which are state-funded. There are increasing levels of educational success overall; Muslims constitute a higher than average proportion of those with degree-level qualifications in the UK,<sup>8</sup> and are represented in important positions within academia. Across the country, Muslims provide vital services at all levels of the economy. They are proportionally more likely to be self-employed, and to generate employment for others. They also participate in areas such as the creative arts and the voluntary sector. Taken together, these achievements represent a vital economic and social contribution. Muslims are often also strong supporters of family and community values.

However, the many success stories do not reflect the whole picture. In the UK, Muslims tend to live in cluster areas. In some areas, such as parts of Birmingham and Bradford, up to one quarter of the population is Muslim. There is a concentration of Muslims in inner city areas whereas older more affluent White British communities live in the suburbs. Many cluster areas for Muslim populations are industrial towns that are now in serious decline. Because of poor education, a lack of labour market skills and some discrimination in the job market many Muslims are effectively trapped in these areas.<sup>9</sup> They face multiple layers of disadvantage and discrimination, both in social housing policy and by not having access to decent quality private sector housing.<sup>10</sup> There are effects on health too, with high levels of stress, diabetes, coronary disease and pre-natal mortality in some Muslim communities. And whereas the Muslim population in Britain is around 3%, the total British Muslim prison population stands at 6%. If foreign Muslim prisoners are added to the total the figure actually stands at 11%.

Against this background, it is important to stress that the idea of Muslims simply "choosing" to withdraw from mainstream society to live "separate lives" is a simplification presented in parts of the media that does not relate to lived experience. Geographic clustering happens not only through choice but also because of issues around mobility, discrimination and social disadvantage. In reality, Muslims are more likely to have non-Muslim friends, and to interact positively and be part of society, than the media often suggest.<sup>11</sup> However, such misrepresentation, together with the implementation of state policy – such as stop and search – can even affect how Muslim communities see themselves.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to have a sense of equality, both of opportunity and of outcome. There was some evidence that Muslims are still the subject of discrimination based on their religious identity.<sup>13</sup> Muslims are not yet protected by the full width and depth of the Race Relations legislation – although important advances have been made in recent years in legal protection against crimes and discrimination on grounds of religion and belief. However, there are significant differences between the different

communities within the Muslim population: for example, Indian Muslims in London often have very high educational attainment, whereas Pakistani Muslims in Birmingham perform less well. And relative to the size of their community, working class men have greater problems of educational underachievement. Across all ethnic backgrounds, Muslim women outperform men across a broad range of subjects.

<sup>12</sup> See Open Society Justice Initiative. 2009. *Ethnic Profiling in the European Union: Pervasive, Ineffective and Discriminatory*. New York: Open Society Institute.

## Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism in Western societies first gained popularity and official recognition in the 1970s in Canada, Australia, the USA and the UK. It had been connected to immigration which had happened for labour market purposes.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2004/jul/12/discriminationwork.workand-careers>.

At first, multiculturalism had not been a policy so much as a philosophical ideal. Some had rejected it, arguing that it was a way of tying people to their roots and a form of social control, and that it was better to regard everyone in the same way and to offer equality of opportunities for all. However, others argued that such equality need not be contingent upon assimilation and that diversity and multiculturalism contributed to vibrant and ultimately stronger and more prosperous societies. In the 1970s, there was also the rise of an active anti-racism movement. More recently, positive developments have included the introduction of the Human Rights Act 1998, the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, the Employment Equality (Religion or Belief) Regulations 2003, the Equality Act 2006 and the Single Equality Bill 2009. All of these protect against discrimination based on differences of race and/or religion, promote equality of opportunity for all – irrespective of race or religion, and thereby promote greater diversity and multiculturalism.

## Community Cohesion and Radicalisation

After the 'northern riots' of 2001, however, government policy focused on initiatives aiming to enhance "community cohesion" by promoting greater integration and, some would argue, assimilation. A number of reports emerged from the series of riots that took place in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford. The reports highlighted a number of issues, including a lack of positive interaction between the local White and Asian Muslim communities; that areas prone to disturbances were affected by high unemployment and disenfranchisement; the lack of a strong cultural identity and the presence of far-right activity<sup>14</sup>. The reports focussed on both Muslim and non-Muslim communities and suggested that community cohesion must be central to policy making with dialogue being encouraged between different ethnic and religious groups in order to debate questions of identity, shared values and citizenship.

<sup>14</sup> Denham, J. 2002. *Building Cohesive Communities*. A Report of the Ministerial Group on Public Order and Community Cohesion. London: The Home Office.



The “war on terror”, however, coloured much of this debate. An assumption soon developed that Muslims are somehow culturally isolationist, and that they are responsible for problems around cohesion. Policy reports have tended to focus not so much on issues such as social disadvantage and grievances in Muslim communities, but on values and identity. Sensationalist headlines around Muslim cultural issues such as modest dress codes have heightened a sense of alienation amongst some Muslims. The implication is that value systems are responsible for problems of social division, and Muslim communities should address these issues on their own.

In spite of this, it is important to acknowledge that there are only an extremely small group of British Muslims who have been engaged in acts of terrorism both in Britain and abroad. While the specific religious doctrines adopted by these groups have been used to motivate and incite violence, it is also to be noted that a majority of people who share similar doctrines (such as radical Salafism) have also chosen not to resort to violence.

While radicalisation as a whole is still not well-understood, it is argued that violent extremism is at root a social and political phenomenon, rather than an intrinsically religious one.<sup>15</sup> Certainly, the causes of violent radicalisation are complex and multifaceted, and involve the interaction of multiple social and political factors including issues of identity, social exclusion, economic disadvantage, foreign policy and ideological persuasion. “Religious” radicalism is one form that violent extremism can take, but the evidence that it is the starting point is mixed to say the least. In the UK, the situation is not helped by the hiring of imams whose political sensibilities may be shaped by conflicts abroad and whose English language and pastoral skills are inadequate for dealing with the sense of injustice and grievance that some, especially younger Muslims, feel. These grievances could arise as a result of either or both international and domestic national policies and practices that are viewed as prejudiced and insensitive.

An inter-generational disconnection also means that parents and imams are often not able to deal with problems the younger generation is experiencing.<sup>16</sup> While it is certainly true that foreign connections have played a role in indoctrinating some extremists, it is also important to stress that those involved in the attacks of 7 July 2005 were British in all senses (birth, language, education, nationality), and their radicalised and violent outlook was largely a product of the social, economic and political conditions present in the UK.

A recent study has explored the attitudes and perceptions of a group of South Asian Muslims in Birmingham at the time a government-funded initiative to “prevent violent extremism” was launched. It argues that the causes of radicalisation of British

<sup>15</sup> See Savage, S. “Identity conflict among Muslims in the UK and the EU.” Paper presented at the Radicalisation Conference on 11 June 2009, organised by the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies, Cambridge University.

<sup>16</sup> See for example: Ahmed, S. 2009. *Seen and Not Heard: Voices of Young British Muslims*. Leicestershire: Policy Research Centre.



Muslims are complex, and include social exclusion, a lack of theological and political leadership, sweeping anti-terror laws and Islamophobia.<sup>17</sup> Another study of south Asian Muslims in Bradford refutes the commonly held belief that British Muslim alienation is an entirely “Islamist” narrative. In fact, the subjects of the study are alienated not only from British society but also from the cultural traditions and values of their own families. The author of the study was struck by their disconnected individualism and described them as libertines. This clearly contradicts the stereotype of Islamists radicalised by a hatred of Western society.<sup>18</sup> Wider geo-political factors also play a role in radicalisation. It is now more widely accepted that there is a link between perceptions of foreign policy and domestic terrorism.

But whatever the causes of violent extremism among the young in the Muslim community, it is incumbent on the community as a whole to play its part in identifying and countering these causes so as to ensure that the community as a whole plays a constructive role in wider society. It is indisputable that extremist groups do not speak for the Muslim community, nor does the Muslim community espouse the causes of these groups.

In dealing with such complex and politically charged issues, the importance of language cannot be over-emphasised. Some forms of “radicalism” are welcome, such as the progressive and green movements that began in the 1960s. Radicalism within the law is often a positive force in society.<sup>19</sup> It is important to be precise in the way that terminology is understood and used, especially in a culture that is dominated by rhetoric and the ideologically motivated use of language. Words are often used as labels to simplify and distort concepts. Muslims are often labelled simply as either “traditional” or “liberal”, for example. Similarly, they may be labelled as either “moderate” or “radical”/“extremist”, with the implicit and misleading assumption that “moderate” Muslims are necessarily “progressive” in the libertarian sense. More generally, cohesion is confused with conformity, shared values with homogenised identity, secular with secularist, integration with assimilation, and pluralism with plurality. Plurality, for example, simply means the existence of diversity, whereas pluralism entails an active engagement with diverse beliefs and perspectives.

## Islamophobia

Muslims became particularly visible in the British media after the Salman Rushdie Affair. Images of book-burning in 1989 provoked the caricature of a monolithic Muslim community uncomfortable with its existence in the UK, whereas in fact the Muslim community is very diverse. Global media coverage of the Intifada, Bosnia and the Gulf Wars has galvanised transnational Muslim solidarity, and affects how

<sup>17</sup> Abbas, T. & Siddique, A. 2009. “Preventing Violent Extremism: Perceptions of radicalism and de-radicalism among British South Asian Muslims.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> Khan, S. “The phenomenon of dual nihilism among the British Muslim youth of Bradford”. Association of Muslim Social Scientists conference, *Muslim Youth: Challenges, Opportunities and Expectations*, University of Chester, 20-22 March 2009.

<sup>19</sup> See the excellent paper on this by George Joffe, “Antiphonal response: social movements and networks”, presented at the Radicalisation Conference on 11 June 2009, organised by the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies, Cambridge University.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, several reports by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism & Xenophobia (EUMC): *Situation of Islamic Communities in five European Cities – Examples of local initiatives* (2001); Allen, C. & Nielsen, J., *Summary report on Islamophobia in the EU after 11 September 2001* (2002); *The impact of 7 July 2005 London bomb attacks on Muslim Communities in the EU* (2005); *Muslims in the European Union: Discrimination and Islamophobia* (2006).

<sup>21</sup> See the report by the Runnymede Trust: *Islamophobia: A Challenge for us all* (1997).

<sup>22</sup> See Cigar, N. 1994. "The Role of Serbian Orientalists in Justification of Genocide Against Muslims of the Balkans", *Islamic Quarterly: Review of Islamic Culture*, Vol. 38(3) for an analysis of one instance of Islamophobic discourse in recent times.

<sup>23</sup> See *emel Magazine*, Issue 55, April 2009.

Muslims see themselves and others. Islamophobia has increased following the events of 11 September 2001 and 7 July 2005,<sup>20</sup> and far-right activity has increased, especially in the fading industrial towns around the M6 corridor. Islamophobia is a real lived experience, with instances of violence and abuse.<sup>21</sup>

While political events have triggered an increase in Islamophobia, there is a long history in European culture of portraying Muslims as barbaric and intolerant.<sup>22</sup> The positive parts of Muslim experience, such as its architectural, artistic and scholarly achievements, tend to be ignored. The idea still persists that the "West" can "civilise" Muslims in spite of themselves, and in particular "save" Muslim women by providing them with liberty, even by means of violent occupation. This could be ideologically conceited, given the hard fought advances made by women in Britain and other Western countries were only achieved within the last fifty or so years. Muslim women are not "stuck in the dark ages",<sup>23</sup> although there are certainly many issues that need to be addressed. While Islamophobia is a serious and real issue, it is not an excuse to avoid talking about problems within the Muslim community, such as forced marriage, domestic abuse and the role of women in mosques and Muslim organisations, for example. Being self-critical is an important dimension of a community of faith, that cherishes honesty, and in no way undermines the integrity and solidarity of that community. On the contrary, it is only through a reflective attitude that integrity and solidarity will be upheld in the long term.

## *The Political Context in Britain: Secularism*

The UK is often said to be a secular society that is characterized by an ethos of pluralism. However, the term “secularism” covers a range of different political philosophies. The group discussed the different meanings of these terms, and the values underpinning them. The group affirmed its support for procedural secularism, noting that it provides many benefits for all minorities, including British Muslims, and allows religions including Islam to be practised freely. However, the group warned against the dangers of ideological secularism, which seeks to deny the legitimacy of religious voices in the public sphere.

### **History of Secularism**

Like all political ideas, secularism is a concept with a particular history. The origins of secularism can partly be found in Christian doctrine and attempts by the Church to carve for itself a niche of authority independent of the state. The origins of secularism can also be found in seventeenth-century Europe and the rise of the modern state. Christian theocratic rule came to an end with the Thirty Years War, a bloody civil conflict that resulted in the Treaty of Westphalia. This broke up the Holy Roman Empire into a group of nation states where religious authority was separated from political authority. This helped to safeguard state autonomy from despotic religious authority, and to remove causes of religious conflict by ensuring state neutrality vis-à-vis competing religious factions.

In view of this history, secularism is not a monolithic philosophy, but is different in different parts of the world. In the United States, for example, the structure of politics is secular, but there is also a strongly religious public culture. In the United Kingdom, the situation is reversed: there is an established Church that is structurally linked to the state, but public culture tends to be secular in nature: it rarely mentions God.

In contrast, there are other forms of secularism; at the most dogmatic end of the spectrum, these not only seek to deny all faiths any public role, but also seek to control and contain religion, sometimes in the name of a rival ideology, such as Republicanism or Communism. Some forms of dogmatic secularism prescribe an “anti-faith” public space where religious beliefs are defined by default as abnormal. The danger of such stances is that they risk denying people of faith a place in the public arena, and even interfering with the practice of religion in private life, for example by prescribing what people should wear. Such a vision of the “secular” sits perhaps uneasily in a country such as Britain where many diverse religions flourish and where more Britons still describe themselves as believing in God rather than not.

### Support for Procedural Secularism

<sup>24</sup> The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, has expressed the role of the state in mediating between different interests as follows: “In its political context, pluralism is an anti-hierarchical, anti-centralist view of social order which challenges an uncritical or oppressive view of the sovereignty of the nation state. A truly pluralist political culture insists that legitimacy is not conferred top-down by an all-powerful state on subordinate bodies, but, conversely, the state derives its legitimacy from the positive way in which it manages the relationship between a huge variety of civil society associations, faith communities and other intermediate human communities.” See Williams. R. 2007. *Islam, Christianity and Pluralism*, 1<sup>st</sup> Zaki Badawi memorial lecture. Joint publication by Lambeth Palace and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists. Richmond.

There is a difference between procedural secularism (where decision-making powers are separated) and ideological secularism (which attempts to exclude or rigorously control religious voices and institutions in the public sphere, and even in the private sphere). Procedural secularism has brought many benefits to humanity, providing religious and political freedoms for minorities of all kinds. However, in some parts of the world, including for example the Middle East, ideological secularism has led to tyrannical and oppressive rule.

Putting aside the issue of the Establishment of the Church of England, it is right for Muslims in Britain to support the *de facto* procedural secularism of Britain – the ‘separation’ of religion from state and the principle of non-discrimination by the state between religions that guarantees plurality and religious freedom. Secular law in Britain provides for religious freedom and protection against discrimination. History shows that in religious states, the power of religious authority becomes hegemonic – suppressing not just other religions but also differing interpretations within the same religion. Many British Muslims have chosen to live in the UK because of its freedoms, and often make this choice in preference to Muslim-majority countries or in preference to a country like India that is dominated by communitarian politics.

British secularism has historically been closer to procedural secularism than to ideological secularism. In general, British Muslims are perfectly happy with this notion of the secular, and it is important to express support for this more accommodative type of secularism that is part of the British tradition. The goal should be to ensure that Britain is a state where there is room for all religious sentiments, and where Muslims have the freedom to practise Islam without interference, in an atmosphere of respect, security and dignity.<sup>24</sup>

Because there are different visions in Britain about what a “secular space” should look like, Muslims need to engage politically in the legislative process to articulate their own visions and values, and to ensure they are properly represented. The support of British Muslims for multicultural secular pluralism must not be based on expediency, but on principled support for religious freedom and peaceful co-existence of diverse religious groups and those of no faith on the basis of mutual respect, co-operation and pursuit of the common good.

At the same time, it is important not to argue from extremes, or to assume that “extreme secularists” represent the mainstream. The government recently prevented a vehement anti-faith activist from entering the UK.<sup>25</sup> Overall, the place of religion in the public sphere is an important question that is being debated more in the US than in the UK.<sup>26</sup> The debate needs to be pushed forward in the UK. The main question is how liberalism can be calibrated to accommodate religious and non-religious opinion.<sup>27</sup>

### **Religious Claims within a Secular State**

British political history has been characterised by a gradual transfer of power over eight hundred years from all-powerful monarchs to the people, as well as by the move away from infallible religious authority. These freedoms have been hard-won.

Given that the British state is in practical terms religiously accommodative, an important question is: what is special about the claims that a religious community can make upon the state within the British context? Why should a secular state have an interest in a public role for religion? What arguments are there for positively valuing and enabling the public role of religion? Increasingly, commentators are arguing that religion adds nothing to public debate because its premises are irrational. Others argue that religion has no place in the public sphere because it makes exclusive claims (that benefit only religious people) rather than inclusive claims (that benefit everyone).

In response, Muslims and other people of faith need to show what is valuable about a public role for religion, and what is special about the claims that a religious community can make on the state. Some have made a “civilisational” argument for religion in the public sphere: that religion is part of the wellspring of human wisdom, and that it can therefore be valued, even by those who do not subscribe to its particular propositions. Others are developing an argument about the moral good of religion, stressing that the presence of believers informing public policy from a religious point of view is a good thing in itself.<sup>28</sup> Some have argued that religion

<sup>25</sup> The Home Secretary denied entry to the UK to Dutch MP Geert Wilders in February 2009.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Perry, M.J. 2003. *Under God? Religious Faith and Liberal Democracy*. Cambridge University Press. Perry argues on jurisprudential grounds for vigorous participation by religious voices in public debates about law and policy. See also Eberle, C.J. 2002. *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics*, Cambridge University Press, which upholds the rights of a citizen to base political commitments on religious beliefs.

<sup>27</sup> Some political philosophers have suggested recently that liberalism should focus more on institutions and communities and less on individuals. See e.g. Modood, T. 2007, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea*, Cambridge, Polity Press; Parekh, B. 2005, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan; Taylor, C. 2007. *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press.

<sup>28</sup> Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, in discussing pluralism and loyalty, concludes that loyalty to the society in which we live should always be “interpreted, enriched, challenged” by our primary loyalty to God. If so, we become models, in his words, of “religiously responsible citizenship”. He challenges us to sustain what he calls “the visibility of faith in the public sphere”. This is not a matter of imposing a theocracy, but nevertheless affirms “the religious roots of moral and social vision”. (See Williams, R. 2007, op. cit.)

provides a ‘social capital’ advantage to society and yet others have argued that the social justice teachings of religious communities are of benefit. The details of these arguments remain to be worked out, but will be important in underpinning the way that the Muslim community, as a religious community, makes claims upon the state.

The political language and culture in the UK are predominantly secular, although over the last twenty years, the Muslim presence in the UK has challenged this. Arguably, the assertiveness of the Muslim voice has given confidence to other faith groups who are also now seeking to make their voice heard more strongly in public. This has also created a counter-reaction, whereby some who were previously content with an agnostic indifference towards religion are increasingly calling for religion to be removed from public life. So there is a dynamic of polarisation, which risks shrinking the middle ground: those who favour compromise and an accommodative role for the state are losing ground to those who view public religion less tolerantly. This is why it is important to be able to show what is intrinsically valuable about religious claims on the state as opposed to any other sort of claims.

In the present climate, political actors both within and outside the state are seeking primarily to be convinced not that Islam is a moral good, but that it is harmless! Their starting position is that Islam is potentially dangerous. This is significant, because, traditionally, liberal political structures in the UK have assumed that religion is, if eccentric, fundamentally innocuous. The emergence of Islam as a political and communal force in the UK has unsettled this assumption. Therefore, there is now a need to justify not only that religions should have a voice in the public square, but also that this is a good and not a bad thing.

### **Theological and Secular Languages**

British political language makes little or no reference to God. Therefore, for Muslims in Britain, political legitimacy (i.e. being taken seriously rather than simply ‘tolerated’) is dependent upon using a public language that is ethical but not always explicitly religious. While everyone has the right to use religious language in the public sphere if they wish, it may be wiser to move to a public language that is more inclusive and appropriate.

The purpose of using an inclusive, shared language is to communicate one’s messages clearly and to avoid misunderstandings. Educated and trained spokespeople are needed in order to do this. For the Muslim community, the shift from advancing minority or sectional claims to offering a vision of the good society for all can only realistically be couched in an ethical language that is shared with the rest of society.

The objectives of the Shari‘ah (*maqasid al-Shari‘ah*) include the pursuit of justice, equity and the common good within society. They provide a set of ethical and social values that are common to all of society. It is important to use this shared moral language when engaging in political debates.

The use of different languages can give the false impression that secular and Islamic ethical values are fundamentally at odds. In fact, many so-called “secular” political virtues are shared with or also rooted in the Islamic tradition. There is no difference between the English term “justice” and the Arabic term *‘adl*,<sup>29</sup> or between “security” and *amn*, or between “health” and *hifz al-nafs*. They are all aspects of human well-being, which is a way of translating *maqasid al-Shari‘ah* (“the objectives of the Shari‘ah”). There is no need to use the Arabic terms rather than the English, or to set up a false dichotomy between secular and theological language. The use of an apparently “secular” political language of equality, justice and wellbeing can be seen as naturally Islamic, rather than as a pragmatic concession to a non-Muslim environment.

<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the English term “fairness” has connotations of both beauty and justice; similarly, the Arabic term for “justness” or “fairness” (*‘adl*) also has connotations of proportionality.

It is important for Muslims to show the rest of society that their commitment to ethical values is first and foremost derived from the Qur’an, and the *hadith*. The challenge is to do this while being clear that one aspires to and believes in the same values (such as humanity and good citizenship) as the majority.

In some cases, it is not always appropriate simply to translate terms from traditional Islamic legal discourse directly into a vocabulary of modern political reason. The formal language of Islamic jurisprudence is not always apposite in the British context. In order to find forms of political reasoning that are suited to this context, it is important to go outside the foundational (*usuli*) literature of Islamic jurisprudence, and look also at other Islamic intellectual traditions, such as philosophy (*falsafah*), literature (*adab*) and theological reasoning (*kalam*).



# *Islam in a Secular Nation State*

## **Problematic Understanding of Divine Sovereignty**

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) combined both temporal and spiritual authority. Thereafter, for around 1300 years, Muslim leaders ruled in the name of an Islamic political order, albeit only a nominal one at times. Most Muslims are still brought up with the story of Islamic political success, where the ideal is to combine temporal and spiritual authority. However, there is a need to re-read this story of manifest destiny. It is important to realise where prophecy ends, and to differentiate between the prophetic and the temporal.

In the twentieth century, some thinkers have argued that an Islamic state is only valid if God's sovereignty is supreme and manifested through the incorporation of the Shari'ah, with its appointed guardians retaining a central vetoing power in a modern state structure. This understanding of the notion of "divine sovereignty" (*hakimiyat Allah*) has in practice in the 20<sup>th</sup> century been used by a single individual or group to claim divine authority and to issue edicts from such a position of power without many democratic checks or balances or much accountability.

However, some of the most prominent figures in Islamic history stood against such a conception: Imam Malik refused to make his theological school the "official" school of the caliphate; Imam Ahmad refused to surrender the religious conscience to the official dogmas of the Abbasid state. The implication of these positions is that the state should not claim divine authority but should be held to account by universal standards through the free operation of the religious conscience.

It is important to distinguish between the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of human beings. Some young Muslims do not make this distinction, which is the fundamental basis of democracy. Muslim thinkers<sup>30</sup> have done some important work

<sup>30</sup> Such as Abdelwahab El-Affendi and Khaled Abou El-Fadl



critiquing these simplistic notions of “divine” sovereignty, but further detailed reflection is needed.

It is also important to acknowledge that, in Muslim-minority countries, the Shari‘ah has undergone an “ethical turn”. For Muslims living as a minority in a secular liberal democracy, applying the Shari‘ah is a matter of personal conscience or communal moral suasion rather than legal sanction.<sup>31</sup> This is consistent with the way that Muslims have lived in non-Muslim majority countries throughout the centuries. There is no obligation for Muslims living in these contexts to strive against the wishes of their non-Muslim neighbours to implement the full legal sanction of Shari‘ah.

<sup>31</sup> For one point of view on this, see al-Na‘im, A. 2008. *Islam and the Secular State*. Harvard University Press.

As part of this ethical turn, it is important to reclaim the notion of *khilafah*, which can be translated as both “vicegerency” and “caliphate”. For most Muslims, it means an Islamic system of government. But in classical Islamic theology, the word has never meant statehood. It is important to reassert its original meaning of the moral responsibility and vicegerency of all human beings before God. In classical Islamic theology, *khilafah* does not imply the imposition of a caliphate or a structure of political authority on believers; rather it means an ethics of individual moral responsibility.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See Qur’an 2:30: “Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: ‘I will create a vicegerent [khalifah] on earth.’ They said: ‘Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? – whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?’ He said: ‘I know what ye know not.’”

### **Legitimacy of Secular Democracy**

An Islamic state is not necessary in order for Islam to thrive and to be practised. However, in the current climate, broad questions are being asked about the relationship between Muslims and the state. What kind of relationship to the state is required to live as a Muslim? To what extent can Muslims accept the legitimacy of a non-Muslim secular democratic state?

A related question is: is the state necessary for the proper performance of religious duties (such as prayer, fasting and the payment of alms)? There is an argument that, in a Muslim society, the state can play a legitimate role in establishing the religion (*iqamat al-din*) through instituting prayer and almsgiving (*salah wa zakah*). One should not deny others the right to argue for such a state. However, in a non-Muslim majority setting, some have argued that a state which provides religious freedom, security and even facilitates religious practise, achieves the broader purpose of the Shari‘ah. According to this point of view, it is not that an Islamic state is needed to make the community Islamic; rather, the converse is true: a Muslim community gives rise to a state that reflects Islamic virtues.

The overwhelming majority of British Muslims feel comfortable with the secular state. The suggestion that there is a problematic relationship with the state comes, on the

one hand, from some non-Muslims who argue that Islam represents a potential threat to the state, and, on the other, from a tiny minority of Muslims who do not represent the mainstream community. Most British Muslims implicitly accept the legitimacy of the state through their continued presence in the country. By enjoying the services and the security provided by the state, paying taxes and abiding by the law, all British citizens have accepted an implicit contract between themselves and the state. Like all contracts freely entered into, this contract is religiously binding and ethically obligatory.

Nevertheless, some ask questions at a theological level. Are British Muslims living in a state of perpetual sinfulness, because they are not living within a perfect Islamic state? Should they, for example, regard the current political structures in Britain as a temporary stage before a more permanent Islamic state is established, or should they perhaps migrate to another country which is closer to being an Islamic state? Many who have done so have been disappointed and returned to the UK. Is it possible, however, to make a commitment to the secular state that is ethical and irrevocable, rather than pragmatic and temporary?

The modern nation state is completely different from the idea of the state assumed by classical jurists. Classical jurists argued that a place can be considered Islamic (the land of Islam or *dar al-Islam*) if religious freedoms, and security, are provided for. The modern British welfare state does this, and more: as well as providing for religious freedom and security, the modern British state also provides a great deal of welfare. Another change is that the modern state has established a single legal system. Historically, under an Islamic state, the regulation of family life within Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities was often subject to each community's own laws and juridical structures. This is no longer the case. In summary, with the advent of the modern nation state, boundaries between the individual and the state have been re-drawn. How should Muslim thought respond to this?

Muslims living as minority communities in non-Muslim states have sometimes argued that their unusual circumstances permit them to live by a different or exceptional understanding of Islamic jurisprudence. This type of thinking, known as "legal exceptionalism", makes two problematic assumptions: that Muslim minority existence in non-Muslim majority communities is a temporary circumstance; and that an ideal form of Islamic government or polity will arise at some point in the future. This utopian search for a perfect Islamic state works against the realism needed to engage with politics in a pragmatic way. It has also led Muslims to avoid asking the original question of what the relationship should be between religion and politics.

The outlook of legal exceptionalism has encouraged some jurists to expect little more from the state except the provision of security, rather than wider goals such as the pursuit of justice and welfare. This is at odds with reality: most British Muslims today operate with a set of expectations of the modern secular and democratic state that are wider than non-interference in religious life: they want equitable treatment and public recognition for their faith.

Legal exceptionalism implies an ethos of defensive survival, whereby British Muslims fight to reproduce religious values in what they view as a competitive secular environment. This leads to relations with wider society that are distinguished by their formality and lack of imagination. For example, even where there are commonalities, this mindset has sought to stress difference, so as to avoid moral and creedal contamination. In reality, and despite this attitude, the ideal Muslim society cannot be composed only of Muslims. Historically, the greatest creativity and synergy has emerged through the interaction of Muslims and non-Muslims, for example in Baghdad in the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries and Al-Andalus (Spain) in the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### **Concept of the “Land of Islam”**

The “land of Islam” (*dar al-Islam*) is a concept that forms part of the worldview of many Muslims, although not everyone agrees on its meaning and implications. In some recent discourse, the concept is often understood as part of a strict dichotomy, whereby a country is considered either part of the “land of Islam” or the “land of unbelief” (*dar al-kufr*)/“land of war” (*dar al-harb*). However, this current of discourse shows a lack of finessed knowledge of classical Islamic law.

The concept of the “land of Islam” is not found in the Qur’an, but is a concept developed by classical jurists in an era before globalisation. According to the main classical Sunni and Shi’i schools of jurisprudence, and contrary to popular understanding, the “land of Islam” does not mean a country where most people are Muslim, or where the criminal penalties of Islamic Law (the *hudud*) are enforced. For classical jurists, calling a land *dar al-Islam* is a way of distinguishing it from a “land of insecurity”. “Land of security” (*dar al-amn*) comprises the “land of Islam”. It denotes a territory where there is freedom to perform public acts of worship, including the five prayers, giving alms (*zakah*), performing pilgrimage to Makkah, performing the fast of Ramadan, slaughter of animals for halal food, building mosques, giving the call to prayer (*adhan*), wearing appropriate dress and avoiding the cardinal sins. There is freedom to do all of these things in the UK, whereas in some Muslim-majority countries there are more restrictions.

For the classical jurists, another fundamental issue in deciding whether a land is “*dar al-Islam*” is the existence of justice. In many classical schools of law, the “land of justice” (*dar al-‘adl*) is another synonym for the “land of Islam”. A land of justice is understood as one where a true leader has established justice, rather than a regime based on chauvinism or tribal partisanship (*‘asabiyyah*). In summary, according to the classical jurists, the key elements that make a country the “land of Islam” are the existence of justice, security and the freedom to practice one’s religion. Britain ranks very favourably against these criteria, certainly more so than many Muslim-majority countries.

Nevertheless, there remains some discussion among a few British Muslims about whether their presence in the UK is legitimate in Islamic law, or whether their presence in Britain is only a temporary and exceptional circumstance. For one’s sense of belonging and identity, it is important to know whether or not one is in a land where one has the right and freedom to practise Islam. The knowledge that the UK can be considered a place where one can live as a Muslim can provide a real sense of rootedness among British Muslims: a feeling of confidence that the UK is their home and a place where they can see their future.

Some argue that simply because justice and freedom to worship are lacking in many Muslim-majority countries compared to the UK, does not mean that the UK should be considered as an ‘Islamic land’, due to the presence of un-Islamic practices. However, even if there are un-Islamic practices in the UK, such as immodest modes of dressing and binge-drinking, not everyone considers them as normal or desirable: many Britons who do not share the Islamic faith also disapprove of such behaviour. And despite the presence of such phenomena in the UK, more serious issues of injustice, oppression and state-condoned murder afflict some Muslim-majority countries.

In order to address the anxiety among British Muslims about whether the UK is an “Islamic land”, it is important to move away from the notion that some countries are more Islamic and others less so, according to an essentialised and frozen notion of the Shari‘ah. It is better to regard each country as providing parallel Islamic options in the way that the Shari‘ah is lived and implemented, and to understand that all of these options are equally legitimate. It is also important to move away from the terminology of the ‘*dar al-Islam*’ and ‘*dar al-harb*’ dichotomy, which is not rooted in the Islamic texts and is not appropriate for a modern, globalised world.

Some recent thinkers have advocated a vision of an ideal Muslim community living on its own, separated from non-Muslims. This discourse draws heavily on the idea of the *hijrah*: Prophet Muhammad’s (peace and blessings of God be upon him)

migration from Makkah to Madinah, in order to set up a religious community on his own terms. It is also to be recalled, however, that emigration was not the first choice of the members of the early Muslim community, but they were forced to leave against their will through relentless persecution, and in the case of the Prophet himself, an attempt on his life. In addition, even from the earliest period of Islam, no Muslim community has existed entirely without non-Muslims. The Covenant of Madinah shows that Jews of Arab heritage and Polytheists formed part of Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings of God be upon him) original community. It is also true that, for most of Islamic history, living as a minority within predominantly non-Muslim societies has been the norm rather than the exception for a sizeable proportion of the Muslim community; even in the time of the Prophet, some of his disciples were mandated by him to seek sanctuary and live as a loyal and faithful minority in the Christian country of Abyssinia.

### **Holding Power to Account: Civil Society and Democracy**

Far from advocating withdrawal from society, mainstream current Islamic scholarship regards political engagement as an obligation on Muslim citizens. While voting is not a legal obligation, it should be strongly encouraged.<sup>33</sup> However, voting is only one form of active political engagement; in general it is incumbent on Muslims to be involved in politics at all levels: to seek justice and the common good, whether through grassroots campaigns, through writing and scholarship, or through standing for election to local councils and Parliament. In the Islamic perspective, political engagement is a way of seeking the common good.<sup>34</sup>

However, the first generation of male Muslim leaders in many cases came to the UK after the Second World War unprepared for the British social context. They responded as best they could according to their worldview, resources and the priorities for their communities at that particular time. They were able to set the seeds of a community including establishing mosques, centres, food shops, etc. More than half a century later, there is now a great diversity within the "Muslim community" in the UK. In fact, there are communities within communities, which are ever-shifting and adapting to their environment. Their needs and issues are all different. Some parts of these communities are engaged in British politics nationally or locally; others are not.

Political engagement, in the UK as elsewhere, is largely a question of holding power to account. The institutions that constitute civil society are an important basis for doing this. Civil society draws on deep-rooted Islamic political traditions. For example, there is a strong classical trend of thought in Islam that argues that Muslim scholars (*ulama*) should hold kings to account by acting as the moral conscience of society,

<sup>33</sup> The European Council for Fatwa and Research ([www.e-cfr.org/ar/](http://www.e-cfr.org/ar/)) has expressed the importance of voting, including such scholars as Yusufal-Qaradawi and Faisal Mawlawi. For more opinions from Muslim scholars, see the section on "Muslim scholars and voting" in the following article: [www.muslimdirectory.co.uk/viewarticle.php?id=261](http://www.muslimdirectory.co.uk/viewarticle.php?id=261)

<sup>34</sup> For a general discussion on Islam and democracy, see: Esposito, J & Voll, J. 1996. *Islam and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

speaking truth to power on behalf of the powerless. And according to Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings of God be upon him) own words, it is the scholars (and not the rulers) who are the inheritors of the Prophetic legacy.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Al-Qurtubi, 2004. "al-'Ulama' warathatu al-'anbiya'". *Tafsir Qurtubi*. Vol XI, p.56. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya.

These traditions prefigure the idea of civil society, and the notion behind the democratic nation state that a just political order is best served by holding power to account. Therefore, from a classical, orthodox point of view, it is possible to make an ethical commitment to a state where a strong civil society holds rulers to account. Islamic institutions of learning, charitable endowment (*awqaf*), hospitals and museums all show that there was a strong emphasis on civil society.

Conceptually however Muslim political discourse has lost this emphasis, simply referring to the "individual" and the "state", largely neglecting notions of civil society. The emphasis in Muslim political thought now should be on reviving and maintaining the independence of civil society, where citizens form effective alliances to hold the state to account.

<sup>36</sup> Qur'an, 3:110. "Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah. If only the People of the Book had faith, it were best for them: among them are some who have faith, but most of them are perverted transgressors."

If Muslims are to form part of a virtuous community<sup>36</sup> or an ethical vanguard that holds the government to account, it is important to ask what role other communities will play in this ethical vanguard. No single group has a monopoly on ethical discourse, and this means that there will inevitably be conflicts between different ethical actors. While civil society groups might advocate one ethical view, the government might advocate another – for example it made ethical arguments for the War in Iraq. The question is how to react to and handle conflicts on ethical issues.

One way to approach these conflicts is to look theologically at how to frame notions of the public good. These notions of public good can be in conflict with one another. Precisely how these different interests (such as security and freedom) are to be balanced cannot be laid down in advance according to a neat hierarchy; the way in which different interests are argued for and balanced is precisely what politics is about.

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of the importance of public critique in 'Enlightenment' Kantian tradition, and in an Arab Muslim tribal context, see Asad, T. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

If Muslims are to be more concerned about holding power to account, then religion (understood as the ethical conscience rather than as theocracy) and politics (understood as pragmatic real-politik) need to be held in creative tension with one another. If secularism (procedural secularism, not fundamentalist secularism) achieves that creative tension, then it should be regarded as perfectly Islamic. Democratic secularism is one of the best frameworks within which to fulfil the Islamic imperative of holding power to account in the British context.<sup>37</sup>

## *Islam and Pluralism*

As with secularism, the group discussed the meanings and implications of pluralism, and their compatibility with Islam. The subject is important because the British context is inherently pluralistic: Britons subscribe to a variety of different belief systems, and the British state, more than simply recognising the existence of diversity, is committed to a philosophy of accommodating pluralism. There is also a theological reason why Muslims are interested in pluralism: the Qur'an recognises the existence of different religions, and within this context it calls on Muslims to respect the brotherhood of humanity, and to promote the common good.<sup>38</sup> In summary, the group agreed that Muslims should assert and teach the truth of their basic commitments while recognising the right of others to do the same.

<sup>38</sup> For further reading, see Shah-Kazemi, R. 2005. *The many in the light of the One*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society.

Pluralism in this sense means that Muslims should accept that holders of other faiths or of no faith have a right to assert the validity and truth of their basic beliefs and values, and even claim it as the only true way, just as Muslims can. It means that no faith community should be forced in any way to compromise the integrity of its belief system in order to be part of this admirable code of co-existence and mutual respect for the choices of fellow human beings.

### **Compatibility of Islam and Pluralism**

Islam recognises the right of individuals to choose between belief and non-belief – this is the essence of pluralism. Islam recognises and values pluralism, both internal (i.e. diversity within the Muslim community) and external (i.e. different beliefs beyond the Muslim community).

Some commentators have argued that Islam, like all monotheisms, is opposed to the idea of a plural society, because it holds that there is only one truth. However, all



<sup>39</sup> "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy handhold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things."

<sup>40</sup> "And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours: verily in that are Signs for those who know."

<sup>41</sup> "To thee We sent the Scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety: so judge between them by what Allah hath revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that hath come to thee. To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute."

<sup>42</sup> "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other)..."

religions and all worldviews, including liberal pluralism, believe that they are superior to other worldviews. In practice, it is possible to live as a Muslim, committed to the truth of Islam, while maintaining peaceful and friendly relations with others. Indeed, the Qur'an makes it clear that Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings of God be upon him) task is to deliver the divine message; he has no authority to force others to accept it (Qur'an 2:256).<sup>39</sup> Pluralism is divinely ordained in the Qur'an, which sanctions not only diversity of cultures, languages and races, but also of religion (see Qur'an 30:22,<sup>40</sup> 5:48,<sup>41</sup> 49:13<sup>42</sup>). According to the Qur'anic narrative, pluralism is part of the human condition, or *fitrah*.<sup>43</sup>

The Qur'an supports the principle of pluralism in other ways too. For example, it calls on Muslims to bear witness to truth and justice, even against their own interests or the interests of their family and group (Qur'an 4:135).<sup>44</sup> In this "identity-blind" commitment to justice, the Qur'an explicitly recognises the rights of everyone, including those who do not share the Islamic faith. In addition to this, Islam, uniquely among the three Abrahamic religions, has a kind of pluralism built-in: it acknowledges earlier revelations and presents itself as the last of a series of teachings (Qur'an 2:136).<sup>45</sup>

In fact, Islam explicitly recognises not just the validity of earlier manifestations of the monotheistic faith, but affirms their doctrinal integrity, repeatedly challenging members of these traditions to adhere to the tenets of their faith. The Qur'an repeatedly affirms that God has preordained pluralism in order to "test you in what He hath given you", and so that adherents of each faith community should "strive as in a race in all virtues".<sup>46</sup> In summary, the Qur'an recognises the existence and rights of non-Muslims. It indicates that God has deliberately decided to permit the existence of diverse communities, so that they should interact, know each other and compete in doing good.

The Qur'anic message warning Muslims against colluding or associating with enemies at times of war<sup>47</sup> (a common-sense requirement for any society) has been misinterpreted by some to argue that Muslims should avoid friendly contact with non-Muslims. The Qur'an is very explicit in affirming that this warning does not apply to "those who did not fight with you on account of your religious beliefs and did not drive you out of your homes" (see Qur'an 60:8). Several verses in the Qur'an make clear that the default position is to treat everyone with kindness and fairness (Qur'an 60:7-8).<sup>48</sup> The Qur'an also enjoins restraint in response to aggression, and kindness in the face of injustice (Qur'an 41:34-35).<sup>49</sup>

Islam goes beyond the need for tolerance and in fact advocates pluralism. Whereas tolerance implies merely "putting up with" something, the Qur'an states "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you



into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other, (not that ye may despise each other)...” (Qur’an 49:13). This means that humans should go beyond the notion of benign tolerance, and actively seek to know one another.<sup>50</sup>

This Qur’anic commitment to diversity needs to be explored further. Commenting on the Qur’anic verse that ordains diversity (Qur’an 49:13 – see previous paragraph), one scholar has written that “the classical commentators on the Qur’an did not fully explore the implications of the sanctioning of diversity or the role of peaceful conflict resolution...nor does the Qur’an provide specific rules or instruction about how diverse peoples and nations are to go about knowing each other. In fact the existence of diversity as a primary purpose of creation remains underdeveloped in Islamic theology”.<sup>51</sup>

### Othering and the Language of Difference

The distinction between believer and unbeliever is essential in matters of doctrine (*‘aqidah*) and worship (*‘ibadah*); but it is not helpful in matters of social interaction (*mu‘amalah*) or when talking about issues of the common good in society. The issue of concern is not the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims, but how that difference is played out and how language is used. The risk is that the language of “*takfir*” – in other words, labelling someone who does not share one’s own beliefs as a *kafir* or denier of the truth<sup>52</sup> – leads to a harmful and negative mindset that prevents Muslims from dealing with others as selves. Partly this is an issue of reciprocity. As much as Muslims reject certain things, they need to deal with others and be dealt with by others. Treating the rest of British society as wholly different can lead to the idea that Islam is outside the norm of British society. Muslims are part of the British norm, and the norm itself is not univocal, but rather a chorus of different voices.

Avoiding the language and mindset of *takfir* is also an issue of humility. To treat a non-Muslim as a wholly different “other” means rejecting much about them that is good and true. In a plural society, it is legitimate to consider everyone as an “other”. The question is to identify the point at which the “othering” becomes illegitimate: the point at which the other begins to be treated or regarded detrimentally.

The *takfir* mentality is problematic also because it denies some aspects of Muslims’ complex identities. The language of “them and us” also reflects aspects of internal non-acceptance within the Muslim community. It implies for example that homosexuality is an issue that comes from outside Muslim society whereas in reality the question is how to deal with a Muslim teenager who tells his or her parents that he or she is gay. In this sense, how Muslims treat “others” is no different from the question of how they are treated themselves.

<sup>43</sup> For an exposition of the Qur’anic basis for religious pluralism, see Shah-Kazemi, R. 2002. “The Metaphysics of Interfaith Dialogue: Sufi Perspectives on the Universality of the Qur’anic Message”, in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James Cutsinger, Bloomington, Indiana. See also Hofmann, M.W. 2005. “Religious Pluralism and Islam”, in *Islam and Global Dialogue, Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, ed. R.Boase, pp. 238-239. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing.

<sup>44</sup> “O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both...”

<sup>45</sup> “Say ye: ‘We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Isma’il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: And we bow to Allah (in Islam)’.”

<sup>46</sup> See Qur’an 5:48 (previous page). For further reading, see also Sachedina, A. 2001. *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, New York: OUP; and Esack, F. 1996. *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Qur'an 3:28: "Let not the Believers take for friends or helpers Unbelievers rather than Believers: if any do that, in nothing will there be help from Allah except by way of precaution, that ye may Guard yourselves from them. But Allah cautions you (to remember) Himself; for the final goal is to Allah."

<sup>48</sup> "It may be that Allah will grant love (and friendship) between you and those whom ye (now) hold as enemies. For Allah has power (over all things); And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) Faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just."

<sup>49</sup> "Nor can goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better: Then will he between whom and thee was hatred become as it were thy friend and intimate! And no one will be granted such goodness except those who exercise patience and self-restraint – none but persons of the greatest good fortune."

<sup>50</sup> See Eck, D.L. 1993. *Encountering God*. Boston: Beacon Press, pp.190-199. See also Safi. O (ed.), 2003. *Progressive Muslims on Justice, Gender and Pluralism*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, p.24.

<sup>51</sup> El-Fadl, K.A. 2002. *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*. Boston: Beacon Press.

The language of "them and us" is problematic because it puts up barriers that restrict Muslims from sharing the divine message with others. Islam is meant for the benefit of all humanity. The language of difference can quickly become an impenetrable structure that keeps others beyond the reach of the faith. This runs counter to the way in which Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) dealt with all people: for example, the flexible way in which he dealt with those new to Islam, and the way he included in his use of the term "*ummah*" all those living in Madinah, including Jews, Polytheists and others.

The language of *takfir* is not just something applied to those outside the Muslim community. It is also sometimes directed by some Muslims against other Muslims who disagree with them. The language used in these cases is often violent and this has an effect on young people. It is important to get away from this language, and recognise that it is a good thing to have different views, beliefs and practices within the Muslim community. Pluralism in this sense means using a range of perspectives from all Muslim communities in the UK to inform the debate about what it means to be a British Muslim. Inevitably there will be disagreements; what is needed is an ethics of how to disagree, and still find common cause.

The political context for the "them and us" language is that many Muslims feel disempowered and experience a lack of confidence in their Muslim identity. It is important to have an internal mechanism that provides this confidence. There are two aspects to this. Internally, it is a question of accepting one's own difference, working out a way to understand and be proud of oneself, without sealing oneself off from the rest of society. Externally, it means that Muslims need to participate in and play a role in forming the public debate on pluralism and moral engagement.

## **Respect for Others**

The question of relations between Muslims and non-Muslims is connected to the issue of what "respect" means in a plural society. Muslims living in Britain benefit from a relatively high degree of freedom to hold to and practise Islam. In many cases this is the reason why Muslim families have chosen to live in Britain. The foundation of this freedom is the respect for others to hold and practise beliefs that are different from one's own (so long as the beliefs are not practised in a way that harms others). The vast majority of British Muslims will therefore readily respect others' freedom of belief.

Respect is also a question of social reciprocity. Since other religious groups have treated Islam with a great deal of respect, it is incumbent upon Muslims to return

that respect. In practice this means refraining from slandering or offending others' beliefs and values, something that the Qur'an has warned against,<sup>53</sup> and reciprocating the friendship and hospitality that others offer. It is possible to do this while believing that Islam is the true path to salvation. Respect is also related to the Qur'anic imperative to co-operate in pursuit of the common good. Overall, Islam teaches respect for all not only on a reciprocal basis but on the basis of a shared common humanity.

### **Attitudes to Authority, Hierarchy and Respect**

It may be argued that Muslim notions of authority, hierarchy and respect tend to be too romanticised, while Western conceptions of these values have come to be read with more sceptical undertones, at times going too far in that direction. The issue is therefore to negotiate one's way around these cultural nuances and differences. The notion of respect, for example, seems very different. Muslims have learned to accord great respect to religious symbols and icons; at the same time, it is worth remembering that the Prophet Muhammad taught that the life of a single person is more precious than the most sacred site in Islam: "the Ka'bah, and all its surroundings". Yet today, an attack on the reputation of the Prophet or his family, or a holy site will cause outrage, but an attack on an ordinary innocent individual, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, may go unnoticed.

However, in the British climate of free speech, institutions and representatives of religion are often seen to be fair targets for ridicule, possibly because of the cynicism towards authority and power (especially of a religious nature), but ordinary people are not usually subject to the same treatment. A play or novel can be offensive towards a religion or its figureheads, but Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand were considered to have gone too far in making an individual the target of crude humour<sup>54</sup>. Granted that there are many other complexities around these issues, such as the medium, or Ross and Brand being employed by the publicly-funded BBC, but the point can still be made that our notions of freedom, and conversely of offence, are culturally contingent. They are not absolutes. There genuinely does seem to be a clash of cultures here – a difference that can get lost in translation.

### **Civic Morality and Good Neighbourliness**

Rather than concentrating on difference, it is important to focus on issues of commonality – identifying shared values and principles between Islam and other worldviews. In practice, this means identifying a kind of civic morality that articulates

<sup>52</sup> Literally in Arabic, *takfir* means "declaring someone to be a *kafir*". Today, *kafir* is often used to mean someone who does not believe in God, but it has also become common to restrict its meaning to that of "unbeliever" or "infidel" in the specific, restricted sense of one who rejects the system of doctrine and law promulgated in the Qur'an and amplified by the teachings of the Prophet. However, its original meaning in the Qur'an is wider: it means someone who denies the truth in the widest spiritual sense, whether this truth is "the existence of God, a particular religious doctrine, a self-evident moral proposition, or the existence of, and therefore gratitude for, favours received." (See Asad, M. 2004. *The Message of the Qur'an*, op. cit., in particular the commentary on Qur'an 74:10).

<sup>53</sup> Quran 6:108: "Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus have We made alluring to each people its own doings. In the end will they return to their Lord, and We shall then tell them the truth of all that they did." See also Qur'an 29:46: "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, 'We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam).'"

<sup>54</sup> This refers to a BBC radio broadcast on October 18, 2008. The programme, which made a private individual the target of crude humour, led to several thousand complaints and the resignation of some of the executives and comedians involved.

basic values for how one treats others. It would also establish the acceptable limits for how one manifests or applies one's beliefs in society. These rules and values need to be agreed across British society in a wide conversation in which Muslims participate fully. Part of this civic morality could entail coming to a shared understanding on meaningful coexistence, then working out what non-discrimination and mutual respect mean in practice, and how to negotiate the delicate balance between free speech and offence in our diverse country.

The starting point for building this framework, from an Islamic point of view, are the principles outlined in the Qur'an and *hadith*, including the ethos of good neighbourliness, charity, hospitality, non-aggression, honouring of commitments and competing in doing good. The Islamic conception of virtue has been defined in an authentic *hadith* as having "good manners" or "generosity of spirit". Another *hadith* states that "he from whose mischief his neighbour does not feel safe will never enter paradise". Considerate behaviour towards others is thus a defining characteristic of being a good Muslim.

For Muslims, it is vital to treat non-Muslim individuals as equal (in the domain of social interaction), without necessarily regarding all of their beliefs as equally correct (in the domain of doctrine and worship). This attitude draws on the distinction in classical Islamic traditions between the domain of doctrine and worship (*'aqidah/ 'ibadah*) and the domain of interaction with others (*mu'amalah*), including issues such as the civil and social contract that we all share with each other.

This distinction between *'aqidah/ 'ibadah* and *mu'amalah* is similar to the distinction, in British law and international codes of human rights, between the right to belief, and the right to apply that belief in society. For example, under British law, Muslims (like other religious groups) can hold beliefs about the wrongness of homosexual practice, but cannot discriminate against someone with a different sexual orientation in the domain of basic human rights, or civic rights, such as access to education, state benefits, housing and so on.

Using this distinction, a Muslim can say that followers of all religions and beliefs have the same standing in society, but from a theological or belief perspective, Islam is the truth. This is not to say that belief is just a private matter, or interaction just a public matter. Islamic laws of social interaction apply in private relationships between Muslims, and there should be no bar on expressing one's beliefs in the public sphere.

## *Human Rights and the Shari‘ah*

The discussion about civic morality led onto a discussion about the relationship of human rights discourses to Islamic ethical and legal traditions. In general, the group agreed that there is a great deal in common between human rights declarations and the aims of the Shari‘ah (*maqasid al- Shari‘ah*), which seek to establish equity, dignity and justice for all. Islam also forbids abuses and crimes such as forced marriages of men and women, domestic violence, female genital mutilation and so-called “honour killings”.

### **Human Rights: An Islamic Concept?**

There was a movement in the Muslim world in the 1950s and 1960s to develop Islamic conceptions of human rights. Subsequently, in the 1980s, Muslim scholars worked out a statement of an Islamic conception of human rights under the Muslim Council of Europe. In many respects these are similar to the European Convention on Human Rights.

There is a concept in the Islamic tradition that is in some ways similar to human rights, called *huquq al-‘ibad* (“the rights of God’s servants”). This is a collection of social rights and obligations that are underpinned by moral values and by one’s relationship with God. The basic moral values are altruism, love of God, and love of humanity. However, there are important distinctions between *huquq al-‘ibad* and human rights: in the former, humans are defined as subjects rather than citizens, and obligations are emphasised rather than rights. By contrast, human rights discourses tend to emphasise rights rather than obligations.

There is a spectrum of reactions in Muslim thought regarding human rights: some have argued that there is nothing in Islam resembling human rights; others have

sought to subordinate all Islamic teachings to modern conceptions of human rights. A third approach has sought to reconcile human rights with Islamic principles as far as possible – to identify Qur’anic verses that support most articles of international declarations of human rights, such as the freedom of speech and movement. However, this effort of reconciliation should be seen as an intermediate stage to establishing a fully Islamic notion of global justice (called *maqasid al-Shari’ah* in the Islamic tradition), based on principles of equity, dignity and justice. There is an important caveat to this: while British Muslims benefit from human rights law, some consider that some aspects of human rights discourse have a political usage in the international arena. It is important not to be naïve about a political usage of human rights discourses.

It is also noted that interpretations of Islamic law do not always provide the same freedoms as international declarations of human rights. For example, a Muslim woman does not currently have the right to travel to Makkah for Hajj without a male chaperone. We have yet to see a strong rights movement in the Muslim world arguing that this constitutes an un-Islamic abuse of the rights of women.

Some participants stressed that the human rights discourse should be seen not as a Western product which needs to be reconciled to Islam, but as a part of human heritage to which many people, including Muslims, have contributed. World conscience came together after World War II and the Holocaust, one of the most dreadful events in history, to create a universal declaration of human rights. Muslims were integrally involved in developing that language,<sup>55</sup> and should embed notions of human rights in sciences of Islamic spirituality and moral teachings, to show how important and fundamental they are to Islam. Muslims should not seek to establish a different version of human rights, as this would undermine its nature as a universal project, and place Muslims outside what should and ought to be a universal enterprise. If the scope of international human rights needs extending, then Muslims should continue along with all others to contribute to that debate.

Islam should be seen as God’s articulation of how He wants humans to live with their intrinsic nature (*fitrah*). This articulation can be in different languages and take different expressions. Muslims adopted a particular heritage because of the Arabic language and the geographical context in which Islam first spread. The challenge for British Muslims is to re-contextualise those teachings: to remove the context of the primary geography and articulate Islamic principles in a new environment.

Part of this task is to articulate support for human rights, freedom and democracy, in the same way as Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) used to speak of an association of virtue (*hilm al-fudul*),<sup>56</sup> for although this civic

<sup>55</sup> Most Muslim countries participated in the discussions that led to the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

<sup>56</sup> A pre-Islamic undertaking by a small group of influential Makkans to come to the aid of any powerless individual who was subject to abuse by the powerful.

association dated from before his Prophethood and was not based on revelation, he later affirmed that he would still have joined any common venture with neighbours to advance any common good. It should not be difficult for Muslims to adopt and express support for these things. Many Muslims live in Britain precisely because of the human rights and relative freedoms that are available here. These things make it possible to practise and bear witness to Islam in a way that may not be possible everywhere else. Human rights norms should be accepted universally, as protecting non-Muslim minorities in Muslim-majority countries, just as they protect Muslim minorities in non-Muslim-majority countries. Muslims should accept this not just out of reciprocity but out of a sense of duty towards fellow human beings and citizens.

As part of the discussion about human rights, there was a brief discussion on the issue of apostasy (whereby a person chooses to leave the Islamic religion). The issue has been debated extensively in recent scholarship. The following points were made in the discussion.

While Islam, like any other religion, frowns upon a person leaving the faith, there is no compulsion and people cannot be coerced into a religious commitment. There are examples of people who left Islam in the early years and they were allowed to go about their own way.

Academics have shown that much classical Islamic law on apostasy is in fact concerned with treason: it emerged in a historical context where apostasy represented a betrayal of the community by joining groups waging war on it. It is important to disentangle these issues and say quite simply that people have the freedom to enter the Islamic faith and the freedom to leave it.

Since Islam is a coherent and universal religion, the principle of religious freedom should apply across the world, and not just in Britain.

More generally, the Qur'anic principle of honouring one's commitments means respecting British law and the norms of pluralist co-existence in British society. However, this should not prevent Muslims from criticising some of these laws and norms and seeking to change them through legitimate channels where there may be vital issues at stake. The freedom to disagree publicly is an essential part of pluralism. Indeed, Britain has a noble tradition of active citizenship through intelligent and peaceful dissent.

There was also a discussion about sexual morality. The following points were made:



- Islam encourages marriage between men and women. The Qur'an forbids the practice of homosexual acts but it is also a duty on Muslims to treat all human beings irrespective of their sexuality with dignity and respect. Having said this, many in the group felt that homosexuality is often the subject of undue attention. While homosexual acts are forbidden in the Qur'an, there are many other acts which pose greater moral risks to humanity, such as tyranny, arrogance, cruelty, and greed.
- Muslims should support the right of homosexuals to be protected from harassment and discrimination under the law. The same legislation that outlaws discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, also outlaws discrimination on the basis of religion or belief.<sup>57</sup> It was also argued, however, that pluralism should entail the freedom to say publicly that the practice of homosexuality is wrong. We were also reminded that homosexuality is a reality in the Muslim community: it is part of society and it is therefore to be expected that it will also be part of Muslim communities.
- While homosexuality is often seen as a question of rights and wrongs, there is another perspective that these rights discourses tend to ignore: the overwhelming importance of relationships and reconciliation. If Islam cannot accept homosexuality theologically, it also does not (nor can it) reject homosexuals socially. The fundamental Islamic principle of mercy (*rahmah*) is at stake. Family or community members declaring their homosexuality could not simply be disowned or excommunicated – the community needs to develop a code of ethics and behaviour around maintaining good relations with those individuals.
- There is a great deal about homosexuality that is not yet explored or understood: why, for example, God would create people whose nature (*fitrah*) seems to draw them in a different direction to the Qur'anic narrative, or whether indeed this has anything to do with *fitrah* at all.

<sup>57</sup> Equality Act 2006.

## **Gender Equality**

Islam teaches the equal treatment of all human beings regardless of gender. Differences between the genders in particular societies relate to culture and tradition, which prescribes different social roles. Islam put no limitations on the roles that women should be able to play in any particular field of employment, for example as government Ministers or in any other arena of leadership. Islam forbids abuses and crimes such as forced marriages of men and women, domestic violence, female genital mutilation and so-called "honour killings".



Muslims have often argued that early Islam was a progressive force that improved the rights of women (for example, to own property and keep their name). These improvements in the position of women predated by several centuries the establishment of similar rights in Europe. These achievements are undeniable, but the debate has since moved on. Since World War Two, the position and rights of women in Europe have changed dramatically. Progress still needs to be made in the West. But it cannot be denied that women are sometimes abused in the name of Islam or Muslim culture: deprived of access to education and other rights, deprived of a voice in the public arena, and subjected to domestic violence. If the early history of Islam was progressive, what has gone wrong since?

It is not appropriate that verses from the Qur'an should be used to control and dominate women and to deny them access to the public arena. Part of the solution is in hermeneutics: how to read texts, and understand them properly in the modern context. Unfortunately, however, some Muslims give too much weight to cultural traditions and have not been able to contextualize early Muslim teachings for changing times. There is, in addition, evidence that a large number of sayings ascribed to the Prophet (peace and blessings of God be upon him) in this area are not authentic, while traditional religious authorities have systematically ignored instances of *hadith* supportive of the rights of women. It is not Islam that denies women their rights, or abuses them; but rather some Muslims who do so, within their particular cultural context. The responsibility is on these people to examine whether they as men are standing in the way of women exercising their God-given rights.

### **Education and Social Change**

Social change cannot be ignored: one reality on the ground is that there is a significant gap in Britain between the achievement of Muslim boys and Muslim girls, especially in the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities. A generation is growing up where girls will be better educated than boys. This will lead to major social challenges, such as new gender roles within families, and difficulties in finding marriage partners. Young Muslim women in particular sometimes face conflicts, because they have been brought up according to a certain tradition, which conflicts with the possibilities available to women in British society. This often places them on the fringe of the community and liable to leave it.

Muslim leaders in Britain face the challenge of how to deal with such situations in a way that reconciles Muslims and their faith. The alternative is to leave these young people lost, and expose parts of the community to disintegration. It is important to

empower young Muslims so that they can express and have confidence in the values that have been passed down from Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him).

### Interpretation of the Sources

<sup>58</sup> Such as Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud

<sup>59</sup> As advised in Qur'an 29:46: "And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, 'We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam).'" See also Qur'an 16:125: "Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance". Muhammad Asad comments on 16:125 as follows: "This stress on kindness and tact and, hence, on the use of reason alone in all religious discussions with adherents of other creeds is fully in tune with the basic, categorical injunction, *There shall be no coercion in matters of faith (2:256)*." (Asad. M, *The Message of the Qur'an*, op. cit.)

Some Islamic thinkers have argued that, with the rights of women as with slavery and tribalism, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) started a social movement that he knew would continue and bring ongoing change in the long term. This position implies that the truth of Islam is not frozen with the passing of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him); instead, Muslims' ongoing readings are part of Islam's unfolding truth. Some Muslim thinkers<sup>58</sup> have advanced a feminist critique of patriarchal structures that they argue are built into the way that the Islamic sources have been interpreted.

Other Islamic thinkers have stressed that the Qur'an is a complete revelation; subsequent interpretation does not add to and cannot change its truth. Regardless of whether it is fashionable or not, Muslims have a duty not just to remain faithful to the truths and values contained in the Qur'an, but also to communicate them appropriately so that people understand the Muslim position, even if they do not accept it.<sup>59</sup>

# *Shari‘ah: The Path of Moral Living*

Islam is fundamentally concerned with ethics: the right way to live. As well as the foundational sacred texts, there are rich Islamic traditions – of literature, religious commentary, law and philosophy – that focus on inculcating moral values and building moral character. The central principles of these traditions are as relevant today as ever, and have a great deal to contribute to contemporary debates about citizenship and society. The group stressed the importance of the *maqasid al-Shari‘ah* – the overall objectives of the Shari‘ah, which constitute common ground between Islamic values and those of wider British society.

## **Parts of Islamic Law Relevant to Britain**

The Shari‘ah is the path of moral living in Islam, ordained by God: an expression of God’s will. Islamic jurisprudence (or *fiqh*) is the human expression of the Shari‘ah: it is the way that human beings have understood and interpreted the Shari‘ah over the centuries up to the present day. The elaboration of Islamic jurisprudence is the job of scholars trained in the *fiqh* tradition, who base their legal opinions on the Qur’an, the *hadith*, the consensus of Muslim scholars, and reasoning by analogy with existing law.

However, this task has always been subject to accountability to the community at large, and to acceptance by sections of it. The act of derivation of rulings is not an esoteric act understood by the privileged few, but a transparent one where rival schools debated publicly the justification for their rulings and submitted to the court of public opinion which accepted some arguments (and the schools proffering them) and rejected others.

*Fiqh* is a huge corpus of literature accumulated over the past fourteen centuries. Some of the *fiqh* tradition is relevant only within the historical and political circumstances in which it was created. *Fiqh* is different in different localities: a legal opinion that fits a Muslim majority country will not necessarily be appropriate for British Muslims.

### **Flexibility of Islamic Jurisprudence**

Islamic jurisprudence or *fiqh* is an intrinsically flexible and ever-changing system; it is important to retain this flexibility and revitalise it where it is absent. As a human interpretation of the divine Shari‘ah, *fiqh* is open to continual adjustment, by those trained in the Islamic tradition and with a knowledge of the local context in which the law is to be applied. *Fiqh* is not set in stone, and is not derived only from the Qur’an and *hadith*. The institutions of *ijma’* (deriving law by relying on consensus) and *qiyas* (deriving law through analogy) allow Islamic law to develop through time. Skilled jurists take social change into account, consult those involved, and provide a ruling that directly answers the question a particular person in a particular situation asks.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> There are also many other sources of law – see Kamal, M.H. 2003. *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society. On the historical development of Islamic law, see also Hallaq, W. 2009. *Shari‘a*. Cambridge University Press.

In producing *fiqh* rulings, it is also often necessary to balance different notions of the good: the Islamic notion of the public good (*maslahah*) has always required a balancing of what is just and beneficial with what standard rules require. The ethical Shari‘ah, today as in the past, therefore requires an engagement with both the Qur’anic text and the modern context. Some argue that this engagement requires a sensitivity to the realities of civil society: civil liberties and human rights. Some also argue that Islamic jurists should be more open to incorporating certain aspects of British law and social practices within Islam, as customary practice (*‘urf*).

But while *fiqh* is flexible, this does not mean it is elastic without limits. The object of *fiqh* is to offer advice about how best to faithfully live up to Islamic teachings and implement them in different contexts, and not how to evade one’s Islamic commitments. Ultimately, the responsibility in discharging one’s religious obligations rests with the individual concerned and his/her conscience; the *fatwa* of the jurists cannot absolve the individual of these commitments.

### **Jurisprudence Intended as Intrinsically Ethical**

*Fiqh*, or the science of Islamic law, is at root a science of ethics, concerned with defining the right and wrong way to live. While *fiqh* is concerned with matters of belief and worship, its major pre-occupation is with proper conduct towards other human

beings (*mu'amalah*). This is largely a question of having the right intention and doing things in the correct spirit: the Qur'an stresses that piety is not a question of "going through the motions" of Islamic law.

The ethical dimensions of Islam have sometimes regrettably been undermined by a pre-occupation with mechanistic, purely legal approaches. The Shari'ah has too often been understood as a body of religious law rather than a set of ethical injunctions. This is due to several factors: law has traditionally dominated Islamic intellectual discourse and has marginalized philosophical discourses on ethics; and the implementation of Western legal frameworks during the European colonial period has led many people to imagine law as something to be implemented with the threat of force. However, originally the Shari'ah started as a body of ethics and remained so during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him). It was only after the Prophet's death, as the Islamic empire greatly expanded, that the ethical principles of the Shari'ah were enacted as public regulation.

Some Muslims sometimes comply with the letter of Islamic law, but do not behave morally: they have divorced *fiqh* from morality<sup>61</sup>. This is a tragedy because Islamic faith, at heart, is about being a moral agent: the obligation is not simply to follow rules, but to follow a moral path. When the Shari'ah is applied in letter but not in spirit, without regard to the individual context, it can lead to undesirable results. For example, standard Islamic law requires a Muslim man who divorces his wife to pay her alimony for three months only, on the assumption that the divorced wife will be able to return to her own family networks for support. This is problematic in modern societies, where divorced women might not be able to rely on the support of such social networks. Elderly women who are unable to work are particularly vulnerable in such situations. It is clearly not the ethical intention of the Shari'ah that a divorced woman should end up without any means of support. This example shows that understanding Islam in context, understanding Islamic ethics and understanding Islamic law are all aspects of the same task.

### **The "Objectives of the Shari'ah" Embody its Ethical Vision**

Several contemporary Islamic thinkers have argued that Muslim communities have reached a crisis point on *fiqh*, because they are purely concerned with following rules without understanding the reason for the rules. It is vital to go beyond the detailed prescriptions of the law, to understand the objectives (*maqasid*) of the Shari'ah and the overarching values that inform them. According to classical formulations, the objectives of the Shari'ah are to protect life, intellect/thought, religion, lineage/family, and property/wealth. More recently, thinkers have focused on the deeper values that

<sup>61</sup> See Qur'an 2:177, which warns against this: "It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness that ye believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the way-farer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the Allah-fearing."

underlie these objectives, such as the development of the individual, social justice and the development of society. In this conception, Islam entails responsibility to five things: the self (and its development), the family, the community or society one lives in, the universal spiritual brotherhood and sisterhood of Muslims (the Ummah), and the world.

Through continuing this work – focusing on the objectives of the Shari‘ah and the values behind them, and through using legal reasoning (*ijtihad*) – Muslim thinkers and activists could produce a reinvigorated discourse on Islamic ethics, which in turn will help to produce a community of virtue (*ihsan*). This work should involve input from social scientists and philosophers.

The values underlying the objectives of the Shari‘ah constitute common ground between Muslims and wider British society, since they are broadly concerned with human wellbeing. For example, the sense of justice is one of the main values underlying the Shari‘ah. It is also a common human ideal, and can provide a platform around which to unite Muslims and those who do not share the Islamic faith. Another central value is mercy (*rahmah*), which could legitimately be regarded as a superordinate principle. A famous *hadith* reports God as saying “My mercy precedes (and prevails over) My wrath” and believers are reminded of God’s mercy at the beginning of every chapter (*surah*) of the Qur’an bar one.

By contrast, human rights discourses do not yet give a strong voice to virtues such as mercy. Rather, they tend to stress five other cardinal values: justice or fairness; respect for others’ differences; equality for those who are different; dignity; and autonomy. The emphasis on mercy might be an area where Islam can contribute fresh perspectives to human rights discourses – especially with regard to, for example, the area of environmental protection.

### **Shari‘ah as a System of Moral and Spiritual Education**

The purpose of Islamic law is to train the heart of the believer. Islamic ethical-legal teachings place a strong emphasis on traditional moral and spiritual values such as kindness, generosity, patience and justice, as well as on their role in character building.<sup>62</sup>

The Shari‘ah, in this sense, provides a system of moral and spiritual education that should be the central focus of teaching Islam to Muslim children. There are five elements of Islam that are normally taught to Muslim children: doctrine (some fifty articles of faith); law (some three hundred Qur’anic verses laying down particular

<sup>62</sup> The idea of morality in Islamic teachings needs to be understood in its deepest sense here. It implies not only guarding oneself and others against evil, but also cultivating a consciousness of God and a sense of holy awe (*taqwa*).

guidelines for the Muslim community); the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him); spirituality; and morality. The last element (morality) underpins the whole mission of Islamic education: that humans should be formed with Godly moral characteristics (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlaq Allah*).

### **Teaching Islam in Modern Britain**

It is important to teach *fiqh* in a way that speaks to people's lives. Many young British Muslims are grappling with the question of what the Qur'an means for them, and have very basic questions about knowing and living with God. Some approach the Qur'an partly as an individualist text, drawing on the verses of personal and psychological support that God provided to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him). But while many young people are keen to assert that they are Muslim, current structures in Muslim communities often do not explain Islam in a way that speaks to the way that they experience the world.

A focus on ethics can help to make Islam "real" for young Muslims. But there are two types of "ethics" in society: those built around individual needs, and those built around stigma and shame. For example, a Muslim family whose daughter has become pregnant outside marriage might deal with the situation very differently if they live in Alaska than if they live in a close-knit Muslim community. In the former situation, the focus might be on remedying individual lives, whereas in the latter the question would likely be approached as a matter of shame and stigma. Ideally, the application of ethics should not be about appealing to one's neighbours, but about understanding individuals' needs and building solutions around them. Difficult ethical issues are rarely black and white.

There is a need for public Muslim theologians who can answer the big questions about religion, such as "why should I believe in God?", and "what does it mean for me to follow the example of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him)?" Many jurists are not capable of answering these questions. In matters of belief, Muslims cannot simply follow others: it is the duty of every Muslim to reflect on these questions him/herself. There is a need for publicly available Muslim thinkers to help people do this. As well as answering the big questions about religion, they should also be able to give guidance on the ethics of everyday life: for instance, how, as a Muslim, one should engage with other people. There is a long tradition of different Islamic literature on this subject, from the *hadith* texts to the "Mirrors of Princes" literature. The wisdom of this literature needs to be distilled and built around the reality of individual lives. This can call on a range of skills and knowledge: sociology, psychology, philosophy and Islamic moral science.

The Qur'an urges ethical conduct on human beings in surah 3, verse 104: "Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong..." In order to derive specific values and rules from this general injunction, it is necessary to use reason and interpretative intellect (*'aql*). The method that jurists use to know the law (*usul al-fiqh*), is not a given, but needs to be critically assessed using fresh forms of reason. This is not an easy task intellectually. The community needs to come up with new tools for assessing the methods used to derive the law, and communicate these openly. It is important not to guard knowledge jealously, but rather equip Muslims with the tools they need to approach ethical questions themselves.

Questions of morality and law can never be entirely isolated from power relationships. The question can always be asked, who has the authority to define what is meant by Islam and the proper application of the Shari'ah. Young Muslims need to be given the confidence to develop their own moral compass on the basis of the principles of Shari'ah and *fiqh*. No Muslim can abnegate their moral responsibility to jurists, always relying on them to distinguish right from wrong. Every Muslim needs to be able to make moral judgements on their own in particular situations, on the basis of sound principles.

### **Cultivating Piety and Virtue**

All Muslims are called to live ethically, no matter whether they live in a Muslim-majority society or not. Moral agency is not constrained by the context one lives in. In the Islamic tradition, moral agency can be summarized as having good character, thinking well and speaking well. Living ethically means training one's heart to have the right dispositions and to participate in the divine attributes. This means perfecting one's mercy, compassion, love and justice. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) is understood as the perfect exemplar of these ethical qualities. He defined his mission as coming to perfect the ethics of believers. Notions of piety (*taqwa*), purification (*tazkiyah*), and virtue (*ihsan*) are therefore central to Islamic thinking.

Cultivating piety and virtue (*ihsan*) means going beyond the letter of the law, or the *fiqh* manual. For example, slaughtering an animal requires *ihsan*. This means performing an act with pure intention, intense love, with God as the ultimate purpose, and in the best form possible (e.g in the example above of slaughtering an animal – to minimize suffering for the animal). *Ihsan* is not just the correct attitude for acts of worship; relationships and social virtues are at the heart of the spiritual development of the human as envisaged by the Qur'an. Indeed, worship alone is



not enough to make a good Muslim: other endeavours such as arts, culture and philosophy also add to the development of the human spirit.

It is therefore important to empower *fiqh*, to make it more relevant, but also to revitalise other aspects of virtue, such as *ihsan*. *Fiqh* is an important part of the faith; it takes Muslims to a certain level (such as how to pray, give alms, and fast), but it is important to go beyond that to actualise one's potential as a human being and as an ideal Muslim.

This means changing the way that Muslim children are educated. In madrasahs, the study of *fiqh* needs to be placed alongside a study of *kalam* (theology), *falsafah* (philosophy), and *tasawwuf* (gnosis), with all regarded as equally important disciplines. The study of philosophy should not replace the study of law; rather, Islamic philosophical reasoning can provide the principles to understand law, theology, and other issues such as politics.

## *Citizenship: Forms of Political and Civic Engagement*

In the course of its discussions, the group considered three broad aspects of citizenship: moral values, legal obligations and cultural narratives. Islamic traditions place a strong emphasis on moral values as the basis of one's interactions with others and one's participation in society. These values – such as fairness, kindness, good neighbourliness, and opposing injustice – are important in the way that believers express their faith in a loving, caring and just God. Islamic moral teachings therefore have a great deal to contribute to current debates about citizenship in Britain. Islamic teachings also recognise the notion of the citizenship contract between the individual citizen and the state, and emphasise the importance of respecting the contractual obligations one has entered into.

### **Notions of Citizenship in Islamic Theology**

Citizenship can be seen as a contract between the individual and the state. Islam recognises the notion of a citizenship contract. The Covenant of Madinah is akin to a citizenship contract that was drawn up in the earliest days of Islam. Modern scholarly resources are available on the notion of a citizenship contract in Islam. The notion of *bay'ah* – a contract through which Muslims living under the Caliphate historically recognised their ruler – is also prominent in Islamic history.

<sup>63</sup> "Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: 'I will create a vicegerent on earth.' They said: 'Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood?'- whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?" He said: 'I know what ye know not.'"

The concept of citizenship is related to the Islamic concept of *khilafah* (vicegerency), which defines human beings' relationship with God and the rest of creation (see Qur'an 2:30<sup>63</sup>). The belief that humans are created as vicegerents of God places responsibilities on humans to develop good moral character and to engage with society in a positive way. The Qur'anic advice to "encourage the good and speak against what is wrong", also informs Islamic notions of active citizenship.

Active citizenship is thus a fundamental part of Muslim life. Indeed, the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) said that “if someone is not concerned about the affairs of the community, he is not part of us”. Someone who makes a sincere effort to be active in this way can be assured of God’s support. The Qur’an makes clear that those who make genuine and sincere efforts for God are helped by God to achieve their goals.

Subsequent Islamic heritage is also full of resources on citizenship. Works in the Sufi tradition, for example, focus on individual personal and moral development, stressing the importance of being God’s vicegerent (*khalifah*), morally engaged with society. However, these resources need to be translated into a modern idiom. While there is a great deal of scholarship that provides a basis for citizenship, there is no strong articulation of citizenship in a modern setting. More generally in political thought, there is no coherent systematic articulation of Islamic political philosophy in the modern setting.

The Qur’an defines humans in two ways: as God’s servant (*‘abd*) and as God’s vicegerent (*khalifah*). The notion of *‘abd* emphasises human submission, whereas *khalifah* emphasises human responsibility as collective trustees of the planet Earth. Throughout Islamic history, scholars and the practice of statecraft have emphasised submission over responsibility: the human as subject rather than the human as citizen. There is more work to be done by contemporary Muslim thinkers to elaborate the concept of *khalifah*, and to develop a full citizenship theory in the light of the overall objectives of the Shari‘ah (*maqasid al-Shari‘ah*) and the deeper intentions that underlie these objectives. Building on this, there is room for Muslims to contribute to the wider discourses around British citizenship, as these are constantly developing.

### **Narratives of Britishness**

Notions of citizenship revolve not only around moral values and legal obligations, but also around cultural narratives about identity and loyalty. In this sense, citizenship is a narrative that holds the nation together as a people. It is reasonable for a nation to expect a national narrative; the question is how Muslims can contribute to and be a part of it. Notions of Britishness are fluid and are always the subject of debate, and it is therefore open for Muslims as for others to contribute to them.

There are many sources for narratives about what it means to be British. Some are produced by government, some by think-tanks, and some by individual commentators drawing on their own subjective ideals. It is hard to imagine that top-down

formulations of Britishness will be up to the task of producing a greater sense of patriotism among our diverse communities. Rather, a consensus about shared values needs to be arrived at through respectful engagement between everyone at all levels of our society.

Britishness has also been understood in more general terms as a spiritual identity that favours cultural inclusiveness as an antidote to narrow nationalism and jingoism.<sup>64</sup> The late President Izetbegovic of Bosnia has also written about the common ground between what he calls the Anglo- Saxon spirit and Islamic values.<sup>65</sup> He suggests that the source of this convergence is the 13<sup>th</sup>-century English philosopher and natural scientist Roger Bacon, who sought to establish a balance between reason, observation and science on the one hand, and faith on the other, as well as between individual rights and responsibilities. Jonathan Sacks has developed a similar concept of diversity within a framework of shared political values.<sup>66</sup> He argues for the need for Britain to construct a national narrative as a basis for identity, reinvigorate the concept of the common good, and identify shared interests among conflicting groups. This should strengthen a culture of civility, and find ways to move beyond an adversarial culture in which the loudest voices drown everyone else out. He describes a new model of citizenship based on responsibility to a society connected by the ideas of giving and belonging instead of the competitive assertion of individual rights.

While providing a sense of unity and shared identity, narratives of Britishness should also be left open enough to allow for diversity and development.<sup>67</sup> One characteristic of Britishness is the preference to resolve conflicts of interest through negotiation and dialogue in a spirit of compromise. Historically, Britain has preferred gradual rather than revolutionary change, reflected in an unwritten (or rather dispersed) constitution that has built up freedoms based on ancient precedent. This is a virtue in the debate about national identity and belonging: if Britishness were tightly stipulated, the definition might exclude many of the “minorities” who form part of the British nation. British Muslims, living in the context of these compromises, should focus on the art of the possible: how to belong as believers and to contribute creatively and artfully to national life.

## Identity

It is a platitude that nonetheless bears repeating that identity is multi-layered: there are several levels of identity, including individual-level, community-level, national, and even membership of a global community. Someone who is Muslim might also be a mother, a sister, a colleague, a Briton, a Palestinian, etc. Some may well see

<sup>64</sup> Bradley, I. 2007. *Believing in Britain: The Spiritual Identity of 'Britishness'*. London: I.B. Tauris.

<sup>65</sup> Izetbegovic, A. 1994. *Islam between East and West*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications.

<sup>66</sup> Sacks, J. 2007. *The Home we Build Together: Recreating Society*. London: Continuum.

<sup>67</sup> There is some evidence that the idea of a British identity is becoming less meaningful for Britons. In 2007, less than half of Britain's inhabitants (44 per cent) described themselves as British. In 1997, ten years earlier, the figure was 52 per cent. See Rojek, C. 2007. *Brit-Myth: Who Do The British Think They Are?* London: Reaktion Books, p.8.

their Islamic faith as forming their primary identity but it is a generalisation to suggest that people who are Muslim always relate to other people primarily on the basis of their religious identity. Different aspects of identity are naturally emphasised in different contexts. Local identities, which are often overlooked in this debate, are among the most interesting and important. Local concerns often resonate across society, cutting across religious and ethnic categories.

Identity is also profoundly contextual. One study has shown that British Muslims in Scotland think of themselves as Scottish and see British Muslims in England as backward-looking, while English people in Scotland complain of institutional racism against the English. This suggests there is a civic nationalism in Scotland, but an ethnic and multi-layered nationalism in England.<sup>68</sup>

Some feel that Britishness is a more inclusive and less ethnic identity than “Englishness”. To be British is to be part of four nations within one (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) *and* a nation inclusive of migrant communities too. For this reason, even those born in England might feel more comfortable describing themselves as British than as English.

Identity involves feelings of belonging, and this can be connected to the memory or representation of landscape. There is also sometimes a “myth of return” among second and third generation British Muslims. While the first generation of immigrants usually came to Britain for economic reasons, thinking that they might return to the land of their birth, subsequent generations who were born in Britain still sometimes entertain the same myth of return. This can lead to a sense of not belonging fully anywhere: neither in the UK nor anywhere else.

Identity and belonging are partly a function of how one is received. A Briton might describe themselves as British, but there is a problem if they are seen by the rest of society as Brown, Indian, or Muslim, and are continually singled out on this basis, for example by police or immigration officers. The challenge is to educate people that British Muslims are citizens, not aliens, and that they can be simultaneously both British and Muslim. One option might be to mainstream some of the Muslim citizenship programmes that are being developed so that they help to inform the citizenship education offered to all children.

### **Politicised Identity**

Questions about British Muslims’ loyalty and belonging have been raised recently, particularly after the disturbances in northern English towns in 2001 and the terrorist

<sup>68</sup> See Hussain, A. & Miller, W. 2006. *Multicultural Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

attacks of 7/7 in 2005. To what extent can Muslims develop a British sense of citizenship, in relation to the different traditions and allegiances that they might have? Such questions are often asked of Muslims in an unfair way. But despite this there is nonetheless a need to answer them.

It is natural to retain some ties to another country, especially in the early generations of a diaspora. Many British Muslims have family links abroad, for example to the Kashmir and Sylhet regions of the Indian sub-continent. The diaspora will always have its own dynamics. This can be a good thing, for example by leading people to contribute to charitable and disaster relief efforts abroad. Sometimes however it creates issues of loyalty, especially when people import and live the politics of another country within the UK. It is right for British Muslims to stress their identity as British citizens.

A question that has often been posed recently is whether Muslims support the British armed services. This is seen as a test of allegiance. However, political allegiance to the democratic state is not based upon a blind allegiance to “my country right or wrong”, but is a conscious and interactive process in which citizens shape policies and collectively determine the direction of the state. Extreme nationalism like the one which destroyed former Yugoslavia and other states before and after is abhorrent to democratic thought. Similarly, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) preached against tribalism in the Arab context, arguing that no-one should support another regardless of whether they were right or wrong.<sup>69</sup> If Muslims see another in error, they should seek to advise them frankly and sincerely and not just support them unreflectively. Muslims can reconcile national loyalty with loyalty to the worldwide community of Muslims by choosing a criterion higher than them both: loyalty to fairness and justice. The Qur’an explicitly commands Muslims to be advocates of truth and justice “even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin” (4:135).

Some British Muslims have ties to parts of Kashmir that were previously part of Afghanistan. Similarly, many British Shia Muslims feel ties to the majority Shi’ah community in Iraq. This makes the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, which are already deeply problematic, even more complex.

However, Islam creates an argument for national loyalty because it emphasises the importance of respecting the obligations one has entered into as a citizen when accepting the citizenship contract. This issue has been debated and dealt with in a number of fatwas. Shaykh Abdullah Judai, in Leeds, when asked about British Muslims who wished to fight alongside the Taleban in Afghanistan, answered that “as far as the Shari’ah is concerned, the situation of Muslims living in the UK is that

<sup>69</sup> Muhammad Asad, in his commentary on the Qur’an, notes that Qur’an 49:13 is an implicit condemnation of all racial, national, class or tribal prejudice. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) made this condemnation explicit with these words: “he is not of us who proclaims the cause of tribal partisanship, and he is not of us who fights in the cause of tribal partisanship, and he is not of us who dies in the cause of tribal partisanship”. See Asad’s note to Qur’an 28:15 in *The Message of the Qur’an*, op. cit.

they are under contractual obligations to the state in which they live...It is totally and completely unlawful from the Islamic point of view for a Muslim individual to seek to breach or contravene this agreement".<sup>70</sup> It is of course open to people to renounce their citizenship, after which they have no contractual obligation to the state, and the state has no obligation to protect them. If one does not renounce one's citizenship, hostility to one's own troops constitutes a breaking of a solemnly entered into covenant, and thus violates his religious obligations.

<sup>70</sup> Seddon, M.S., Hussain, D., and Malik, N. 2004. *British Muslims Between Assimilation and Segregation: Historical, Legal and Social Realities*. Markfield, Leicestershire: Islamic Foundation.

While all British citizens have every right to disagree with the political choices of their own government, British soldiers also deserve the support of the citizenry for the difficult work that they do. This of course creates a dilemma for those who do not support particular military campaigns undertaken in their name. This dilemma is one part of the negotiations that people have to make in the complexity of life, and it is one that faces many people across British society, regardless of their faith background.

The Islamic tradition also lays the basis for an ethical patriotism as opposed to a tribal nationalism. In historical terms, the idea of nationalism is a relatively new concept, and it rubs against the grain of Islamic universalism and the idea of the worldwide communion of believers (the Ummah). However, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) expressed love for a particular territory. This is a perfectly natural feeling: it is normal for people to love a piece of land they call home. What Islam is against is that such a feeling should become the yardstick by which all other allegiances and actions and affiliations are measured. In the same way, tribalism – a sense of connectedness with and love for a family or people – is a good and natural thing, but should not define one's sense of right and wrong.

Following on from this, it is important not to split questions of loyalty and truth into a Muslim versus non-Muslim issue. British Muslims should approach political issues such as military conflicts as British citizens, making common cause with fellow Britons who feel the same way. The anti-war movement and G20 protests are examples of this. Muslims should relate to people in society without differentiating solely according to whether or not they share the Islamic faith. It is wrong to say that Muslims should only stand with Muslims, just as it is unhelpful to regard "Muslims" and "government" as "us" and "them".

### **Relationship between the Nation State and the Ummah**

The idea of the nation state is not necessarily incompatible with the idea of the worldwide body of Muslims (the Ummah). While Prophet Muhammad (peace and

blessings of God be upon him) spoke against narrow forms of tribal or ethnic partisanship (*‘asabiyyah*), in the sense of ‘my country, right or wrong’, many have argued that a political order of nation states is compatible with Islam. The prominent Islamic thinker Rashid Rida argued in 1933 that working for one’s homeland does not count as *‘asabiyyah* if it is bound up with working for the benefit of the Ummah – and for the benefit of humanity, for the Qur’an describes the Prophet as a “mercy unto mankind”.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Qur’an 21:107:  
“We sent thee not,  
but as a Mercy for all  
creatures.”

It is important to think more critically about the relationship between British Muslims and the worldwide body of Muslims. The term *ummah* can have many meanings, beyond that of a political and de-territorialised community of suffering. For example, in Prophet Muhammad’s (peace and blessings of God be upon him) lifetime, the Covenant of Madinah defined *ummah* so as to include Jews and polytheists on the basis of mutual security: here, *ummah* means a nation, rather than an exclusive community of Muslims. More thought is needed at a theological level to elaborate the different meanings of *ummah*.

The Ummah is far from the consolidated global political caucus that some might dream it to be. Many British Muslims regard homeland causes as precious struggles for self-determination, but – with the possible exception of Palestine – these are not all held in equal regard in a worldwide Muslim community that consists of many diverse communities. In some cases, the second and third generations of immigrants, unlike the pioneers, have less appreciation of the complexities and difficulties surrounding many of these issues, and tend to idealise these causes as a means of affirming their own identities. That support is also often linked to levels of media coverage or how successfully a conflict might be portrayed as defining a clash of civilisations between Islam and the West.

Among the wider British community, British Muslims are sometimes seen as campaigning hard on issues that affect Muslims internationally, but as less concerned about other international issues or local and national issues. According to this perception, the political drive and passion of British Muslims is concentrated on issues of Muslim suffering globally, and not on pressing domestic social issues within Britain. However, the notion that Muslims are a “foreign policy” community, purely concerned with diaspora politics, is also sometimes a misrepresentation. Many Muslims are in fact just as concerned with local social issues as well as particular international issues.

In general, the Muslim community has moved on from being isolated and purely concerned with diaspora politics. British Muslims are comfortable with democratic freedoms: their voting rates, at least as measured by ethnicity, are only a little lower



(2-3%) than the white majority; they have set up numerous single-issue and representational lobbies; have participated in protest politics based on broader alliances like the anti-war movement and so on; and are making progress in party politics. The use of all these democratic freedoms has found widespread endorsement amongst religious leaders.

If young British Muslims support causes in Palestine and Kashmir, this is about expressing an ethical response rather than a way of expressing a non-British allegiance. In fact, it is a very British response. Muslims are meant to be a society of the virtuous that stands up against injustice and for the rights of the oppressed. These ethical concerns can be misrepresented by parts of the media as suggesting a non-British allegiance. Muslims should at the same time be aware that policy grievances could be manipulated by ideologically extreme groups to push their own agenda.

There is nothing wrong with being a single-focus politics group concerned with a global issue: this is increasingly characteristic of political engagement across British society. Young people of all religions and none are often enthused by globalised single-issue politics. For example, many young people including Muslims are adopting single issues like environmentalism.<sup>72</sup> This can be a positive thing.

It is important to be consistent in one's morality: to campaign also on international justice issues as in Darfur, for example, where Muslims are both the oppressed and the oppressors, or other Muslim countries where Muslims are seen to be the oppressors and non-Muslims among the oppressed. In theological terms, it is a question of having universal mercy (*rahmah*) for all, and being an embodiment of God's mercy (*rahmaniyyah*) for mankind.

<sup>72</sup> This is more of a trend amongst Muslims in Continental Europe – including Muslim members of parliaments from the Green Party.

## **Active Citizenship: Responsibilities and Civic Engagement**

Active citizenship entails influencing, questioning and calling the state to account. If Muslims do not do this, they are not fulfilling their role as active citizens. It also entails influencing people's understanding of what citizenship and human rights should mean. It is important to help to produce these discourses, and not merely to consume them. This means that more Muslims should enter the academic field in the humanities and social and political sciences (rather than only in fields such as engineering and medicine, for example) and help to create new discourses around citizenship.

When developing discourses about citizenship, it is important to emphasise rights responsibilities as well as rights equally. The Muslim community is accustomed to

talking about its rights. This is understandable given that in many areas it is still fighting for equality. But there is an opportunity now to move beyond this. If the focus in the 1990s was on fighting racism and Islamophobia, ten years on there is now an opportunity to focus on the responsibilities of being a British citizen and a Muslim.

This does not mean ignoring the fact that Muslims are at times victimised and treated as second-class citizens in Britain. But it is an opportunity to turn the discourse of victimisation around, and influence the mainstream discourse on citizenship by specifying what a citizen's responsibilities should be. It is the right moment to take this opportunity, since the potential resources in the British Muslim community are huge. The population is both young and diverse, with a wide knowledge of languages and cultures. This knowledge means there is great potential for young British Muslims to contribute economically, diplomatically, intellectually and culturally to the UK in the coming years.

Qur'anic values extend beyond the rights discourses of citizenship to an active concern for one's neighbour. On relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, Islam stresses that all people are the creation of God, and therefore their fundamental dignity should be recognised and upheld. There are examples from Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings of God be upon him) lifetime of co-operation between Muslims and non-Muslims. The Qur'an describes prophets who went to various communities addressing them as "O my people": in other words, they considered those who had not embraced Islam as their own people. In these verses, "my people" does not mean "Muslims", but rather the people with whom one lives. The recent tendency to differentiate between Muslims and non-Muslims therefore goes against the spirit of the Qur'an's teachings.

The Islamic ethical tradition does not allow Muslims simply to be recipients of the welfare state; rather it mandates an ethos of self-reliance and proactive participation in civil society. This means, for example, setting up and participating in voluntary initiatives that help to deliver the UK's social needs. This is one way of embodying the idea of the virtuous society (*hilm al-fudul*).<sup>73</sup> Civic involvement is an Islamic imperative: the care of the young, the old, the vulnerable, the sick, the dispossessed and the oppressed is integral to the Qur'an and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him).

The vision of active engagement in society is thus embedded in Islamic sacred texts. It is the responsibility of Muslims to embody that vision, and thus to act as a "creative minority"<sup>74</sup> working for the betterment of British society for all its citizens. One scholar in South Africa has suggested that the notion of *taqwa* (consciousness of God) should be understood in an active way. To be conscious of God means to be

<sup>73</sup> See note 56.

<sup>74</sup> For the notion of "creative minority", see Toynbee, A. & Somervell, D. 1947. *A Study of History*. Oxford University Press.

conscious of God's creation and to participate in it. In the South African context this meant a commitment to justice and righteousness under apartheid. Muslims cannot sit on the fence on the great issues of the day that confront their country.

The key to changing society is to change oneself. The Qur'an makes clear that "... never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls)..." (Qur'an 13:11). There is no social transformation without personal transformation. Islam first became a transformational civilisation through a spiritual awakening made possible by two creative forces: divine revelation and individuals transformed by that revelation. The transformation of society will come from those who try in all humility to transform themselves.

### **Citizenship Education**

Over the past twenty years, Muslim thinkers have resolved questions around citizenship in Islam, such as identity and belonging, the citizenship contract, civic engagement and responsibilities, and relations with the rest of society. Although the messages are well-developed, a stronger institutional framework is needed to deliver them. While Islamic theology might have valuable perspectives on the citizenship contract, for example, many young Muslims know little about Islam beyond the five pillars of the faith. Many Muslims see Islam as solely about a relationship with God, not a citizenship contract or a relationship with other people.

There are a number of successful projects across Britain teaching citizenship education in madrasahs on the basis of Islamic values, as for example the Nasiha project, the Islam and Citizenship Education project and the British, Muslim and Citizen project. This is an area that can be developed further. Imams in the community should not be teaching Qur'an and *hadith* in isolation, but as a way of reawakening people's sense of membership of their community, their sense of social justice and their responsibilities to their families, their communities and the society in which they live. Part of their task, in other words, is to prepare people to be citizens in a democracy. This needs to engage everyone in the community, regardless of their age or profession.

Islamic citizenship education needs to translate the Qur'anic theology of active citizenship into a modern idiom. It also needs to articulate the Islamic viewpoint on many of the issues that afflict British society, including alcohol and drug abuse, teenage pregnancies, gang violence, rising divorce rates and family break-up, and environmental crises. This will lead to a paradigm shift, when Muslims realise that the Qur'an calls them to be active citizens involved in the affairs of their fellow

citizens and in addressing the ills of wider society. Currently, however, many in the Muslim community – senior figures as well as the young – lack the confidence, knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges and sense of leadership needed to do this. God has given humans the potential to work and serve the community, but this sense needs to be reawakened, and skills – such as trustee and leadership skills as well as a sense of social conscience – need to be taught.

Another part of this task is to promote holistic education. The recently published Cambridge Primary Review<sup>75</sup> makes clear that, over the last twelve years, the National Curriculum has been distorted by the marginalisation of the creative arts and the humanities. The holistic concept of education has suffered, but is integral to the Qur’anic vision in which a person’s perceptive and intellectual faculties are fully integrated with those of moral valuation and spiritual consciousness. Islamic education is concerned not only with the transmission of knowledge (*ta’lim*) but also with the education of the whole being and development of human character (*tarbiyyah*). This is perfectly in tune with what the National Curriculum calls personal, social, moral, cultural and spiritual development.

Muslim pupils often tend to be highly involved in discussions about the issues raised in citizenship education. A recent study<sup>76</sup> concluded that within Muslim schools the teaching of Islam fits well with the principles of citizenship education, producing pupils who are idealistic about their participation in society as moral individuals. In fact, Muslim pupils showed much greater engagement than non-Muslim pupils with those issues of citizenship centred around community.

Citizenship education is not just something that should be aimed at Muslim children. In order for Muslims to be welcomed as British citizens, children at non-Muslim mainstream schools also need to see Muslim heritage as part of their shared history. Islamic history and contributions to human knowledge should be part of the national curriculum alongside a broad understanding of world history and civilisations as well as the history and culture of Britain.

### **Barriers to Civic Engagement**

Not all Muslims accept the discourse on civic engagement. Some have legitimate objections to the way that the discourse is used politically to single out Muslims. Poverty, lack of access to good education, and inequality are also barriers to civic engagement. Active citizenship is easier for those with access to resources, knowledge, tertiary education, confidence and self-esteem. Many Muslims lack these

<sup>75</sup> Alexander, R. 2009. *Towards a New Primary Curriculum: a Report from the Cambridge Primary Review*. University of Cambridge: Faculty of Education.

<sup>76</sup> Bagley, C. & al-Refai, N. "Muslim Youth and Citizenship Education: Idealism, Islam and Prospects for Successful Citizenship Education". AMSS Conference, *Muslim Youth: Challenges, Opportunities and Expectations*, University of Chester, 20-22 March 2009. Professor Christopher Bagley and Nader Al-Refai reported their findings from five "best practice" Muslim secondary schools, and five state schools attended by a number of Muslim pupils in North West England. Their study shows how Muslim and state schools pupils (both Muslim and non-Muslim) perceive Citizenship education, and how it influences their views of society and their role within it.

opportunities, not because of their Muslim identities, but because of social disenfranchisement. This can lead to a sense of disempowerment and dislocation.

There is also a need for a psychology shift or 'mind-set change'. Muslims in Britain should aim at a broader range of occupations across society – not just traditional professional roles such as engineering and medicine, but also education, compassionate care, and roles involving communicative competence, social intelligence and aesthetic awareness. Few currently see academia as a desirable career, despite the grand tradition of scholastic learning in the great centres of knowledge. The production and application of knowledge has been a key feature of Islamic civilisation, and is a form of service to mankind.

Performing *khidmah* (service) – contributing to one's community – is a central Islamic value that motivates many Muslims. However, it is often understood in narrow terms such as contributing to the mosque. There are several thousand Muslim civic organisations, but their outlook is often parochial, focused on responsibilities to do with prayer, Eid celebrations and funeral services. Examples from Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings of God be upon him) life, even before his prophecy, show several examples of contributing to society more widely, for example by helping the poor and needy. The Muslim community is generous, and has a great sense of altruism and philanthropy. But *khidmah* is a concept that needs to be applied beyond the mosque walls. Some are already doing this: for example, schemes to care for the elderly set up by Muslim entrepreneurs, and voluntary leadership projects.

Lack of institutional engagement is a wider problem affecting the whole of British society. Some commentators have argued that Britons are no longer citizens in the proper sense, but consumers whose function in society is simply to buy things. They do not value the passionate sense of politics and civic contribution associated with citizenship. The Catholic philosopher William Cavanaugh has argued that the state is no longer an agent of political leadership, but simply a provider of services and broadly incapable of inspiring loyalty. It is this perceived crisis in political participation and associational life, alongside trends of globalisation, migration and the erosion of the power of the nation state, that has fed policy-makers' renewed concern with the notion of "citizenship".

Even if associational life across British society is facing a number of challenges, mosque attendance is increasing. It is possible that this is because the mosque is regarded as a place of refuge in times of difficulty. Yet how many other spaces of belonging do Muslims feel they have? It is important to ensure that increased mosque attendance is channelled to produce positive outcomes in wider society as well. One

possibility would be to extend the role and functions of the mosque to provide a social and educational space akin to community centres (which are often managed and serviced by church authorities).

In general, a great deal of cynicism can be found across British society. The attitude that everything is corrupt, that nothing will change no matter what one does, seems to have become more prevalent. Yet this saps the appetite to reinvigorate civic society through active citizenship. Muslims cannot give into this, since the stakes for the Muslim community are so much higher: cynicism makes one brittle and unable to deal with challenges. The Islamic ideal of active citizenship and performing service to the wider community runs counter to this attitude of cynicism. It asserts that politics and civic engagement are important.

## **Jihad**

“Jihad” in its true sense is a key part of active citizenship. It means a positive ethical struggle: for example, striving for social justice, fighting against poverty, or making efforts to reform oneself. It means the daily effort involved in trying to live morally, and to improve one’s society by seeking the common good.

Jihad has recently been the subject of intense debate, partly because of the abhorrent misrepresentations promoted by some misguided individuals and groups from within Muslim communities. In some, stringently defined, circumstances, jihad means the legitimate use of force to defend oneself or to remove a greater evil. In classical Islamic thought, there was a rigorous legal framework for the legitimate use of force – similar to the international law framework today. However, this traditional thought on the legitimate use of force evolved in a certain context. Since the Second World War and the establishment of the United Nations, a radically different international environment has emerged. In Europe at least, the new environment, defined by pluralist multi-cultural democracies, calls for a radical re-thinking: the issue now for Muslims in Britain is not how to fight, but how to contribute to the system, or how to change it for the better for all through legitimate democratic channels.

Jihad is often misrepresented as “terrorism”; similarly, political violence is often regarded as a “religious” problem, especially after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. However, political violence is generally connected to territorial and ideological grievances that are not in themselves related to faith. The FARC rebels in Colombia and Maoist rebels in India and Nepal are not inspired by religious movements and conflicts in Palestine, Kashmir, Mindanao and Kurdistan are based on nationalist territorial claims. “Islam” is usually used as a mobilizing force. Suicide

bombings as “martyrdom exercises” in Iraq and Afghanistan frequently make headlines. However, such practices have occurred in different political settings from Japan to Tibet and Sri Lanka; in other words, they owe more to political objectives than religious ones. Suicide bombings are not, and never have been, particular to the Muslim faith. Both suicide and suicide bombings are absolutely forbidden (*haram*) in Islam as is the killing of innocent people.

Even though Islam offers its own perspective on the question, the issue of when violence is justified is not exclusive to religion. Standard legal rationales for violence, such as self-defence and the protection of national assets, are similar in many ways to “religious” perspectives: both deem aggressive force unacceptable and legitimise appropriate means of resistance. In fact, the classical Islamic framework on the legitimate use of force is rigorous, and can inspire a discourse that challenges extremist interpretations of jihad.

Faith-based perspectives on the use of force often emphasise the need for ethical *constraints* on violence. It is vital to develop the Islamic discourse on non-violence. Since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, jihad as a rationale for violence has been open to such gross manipulation by political actors that a counter-discourse of non-violence is vital. Several Muslim political actors and thinkers have been inspired by the Qur’an and *hadith* to produce discourses of non-violence.<sup>77</sup>

There are many ways to respond to oppression other than by fighting. The struggle against injustice can take many forms, such as lobbying, demonstrating, writing and argument. This is part of what it means to be a good citizen; it is part of contributing to society. However, many young people lack the confidence or the skills to protest in these ways or to contribute to the decision-making process; this is an area where more work needs to be done. It is the role of political leadership and Muslim leadership to provide a vision and direction for positive change.

It is the view of this group that Islam is opposed to all forms of terrorism, regardless of who sponsors them. While international law guarantees people facing external aggression or extreme injustice the right of self-defence, the use of unethical methods such as suicide bombing can never be justified. It would help greatly, though, if the international community intervened forcefully in cases of extreme injustice, such as Palestine, to end the conflict in an equitable way, and not leave victims in isolation and despair. Muslims living within democracies as in the UK have a role to play by pushing for constructive engagement by governments in such cases. British youth must also be guided towards constructive engagement in democratic politics as a viable alternative and antidote to incitement to violence by extremist groups using conflicts abroad as a pretext for unjustifiable and destructive terrorist violence.

<sup>77</sup> E.g. Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Fethullah Gullen, Ramin Jahanbegloo and Tariq Ramadan. Non-violent political strategies have also been advocated in the Balkans by Ibrahim Rugova and in Palestine by Mustafa Bargouti.





## CONCLUSIONS

The following points arose in discussion and in many cases indicate where further work or discussion is needed.

### **Secularism**

It is right for Muslims in Britain to support procedural secularism – the *de facto* separation of religion from state that guarantees plurality and religious freedom for all in the public square. Secular law in Britain provides for religious freedom and protection against discrimination. A genuine accommodative approach by the state in religious matters is also a guarantee against militant ideologues who in the name of secularism seek to attack religion and use the state as an oppressive tool against the religious.

It is important to avoid the confusion, to which many young Muslims have fallen victim, between the sovereignty of God as a metaphysical and theological concept and the discussion of issues relating to human political authority. Some do not make this distinction, which is the fundamental basis of democracy. The invocation of notions of divine sovereignty by politicians is problematic in practice since it can be used by individuals or groups ‘to play God’. Muslim thinkers have done some important work critiquing these notions of “divine” sovereignty that are misapplied to politics, but further detailed reflection is needed.

For Muslims living as a minority in a secular liberal democracy, applying the Shari‘ah is a matter of personal conscience or communal moral suasion rather than legal sanction. It is important to reclaim the original meaning of *khilafah* – as a code of ethics of individual and collective moral responsibility (“vicegerency”) rather than as a structure of political authority (“caliphate”).

An Islamic state is not necessary in order for Islam to thrive and to be practised. Classical jurists argued that a place can be considered Islamic (the “land of Islam” or *dar al-Islam*) if religious freedoms and security are provided for. The knowledge that the UK is a place where one can live fully as a Muslim provides a sense of rootedness among British Muslims: a feeling of confidence that the UK is their home and a place where they can see their future.

Far from advocating withdrawal from society, mainstream current Islamic scholarship regards political engagement as an obligation on Muslim citizens. While voting is not a legal obligation, it should be strongly encouraged. However, voting is only one form of active political engagement; in general it is incumbent on Muslims to be involved in politics at all levels: to seek justice and the common good, whether through grassroots campaigns, through writing and scholarship, or through standing for election to local councils and Parliament.

Classical Islamic political traditions envision a strong civil society which is capable of holding rulers to account, according to Islamic standards and the free operation of the religious conscience. In the modern period, democratic multiculturalism is the best framework within which to fulfill the Islamic imperative of holding power to account. It is therefore possible to make an ethical commitment to the secular democratic state, as long as it allows for the free expression of religious voices in the public sphere. The emphasis in Muslim political thought now should be on reviving and maintaining the independence of civil society, where citizens hold the state to account.

### **Pluralism and Human Rights**

The Qur’an recognises the existence of different religions, and divinely ordains diversity in all its forms, whether religious, ethnic or linguistic. Within this context it calls on Muslims to respect the brotherhood of humanity, and to promote the common good. In the pluralist British context, Muslims should assert and teach the truth of their faith while recognising the right of others to do the same.

The Qur’anic endorsement of pluralism means that humans should go beyond the secular notion of tolerance, and actively seek to know one another. Further work is needed to explore exactly what this positive commitment to diversity means.

The distinction between believer and unbeliever is important in matters of doctrine and worship, but not helpful in matters of social interaction or when talking about issues of the common good in society. Muslims should treat non-Muslim individuals

as equal in the domain of social interaction, even if they do not regard all of their beliefs as equally correct in the domain of doctrine and worship.

Muslims living in Britain benefit from a relatively high degree of freedom to hold to and practise Islam. In many cases this is the reason why Muslim families have chosen to live in Britain. The foundation of this freedom is to respect the right of others to hold and practise beliefs that are different from one's own (so long as the beliefs are not practised in a way that harms others).

Islam frowns on the act of apostasy, but prohibits discrimination against apostates. Much classical Islamic law on apostasy emerged in a historical context where apostasy represented a betrayal of the state. It is important to say quite simply that people have the freedom to enter the Islamic faith and the freedom to leave it.

The Qur'an forbids both the practice of homosexual acts, and discrimination against homosexuals. It is a duty on Muslims to treat all human beings irrespective of their sexuality with dignity and respect.

Islam forbids abuses and crimes such as forced marriages of men and women, domestic violence, female genital mutilation and so-called "honour killings", and teaches the equality of all human beings regardless of gender. Islam puts no limitations on the roles that women should be able to play in any particular field of employment, for example as government Ministers or in any other arena of leadership.

### **Islamic Law and Ethics**

For Muslims living as a minority in a secular liberal democracy, applying the Shari'ah is a matter of personal conscience or communal moral suasion rather than legal sanction. This is consistent with the way that Muslims have lived in non-Muslim majority countries throughout the centuries. There is no obligation for Muslims living in these contexts to strive against the wishes of their non-Muslim neighbours to implement the full legal sanction of the Shari'ah. The parts of the *fiqh* tradition that apply to Muslims in the UK are those relating to worship, personal cleanliness and morality, and finance, family law and social interactions (*mu'amalah*) where these do not contravene the laws of the country.

It is vital to go beyond the detailed prescriptions of Islamic law (*fiqh*), to understand the ethical objectives (*maqasid*) behind them. This means identifying the central moral values of Islam. By focusing on these values, and through using legal reasoning

(*ijtihad*), Muslim thinkers and activists can produce a reinvigorated discourse on Islamic ethics, which in turn will help to produce a community of virtue (*ihsan*). This work should involve input from social scientists and philosophers.

The method that Muslim jurists use to know Islamic law needs to be critically assessed using fresh forms of reason. The Muslim community needs to come up with new tools for assessing the methods used to derive the law, and communicate these openly. It is important not to guard knowledge jealously, but rather equip Muslims with the tools they need to approach ethical questions themselves.

The Shari‘ah – or the Islamic path of moral living – provides a comprehensive system of ethical education that should be the central focus of teaching Islam to Muslim children. However, it is important to teach Islam in a way that speaks to the reality of people’s lives. Current structures in Muslim communities often are not equipped to do this and this is an area that needs further attention. There is a need for publicly available Muslim theologians who can answer basic and important questions about religion, and give guidance on the ethics of everyday life. There is a long tradition of different Islamic literature on these subjects, but its wisdom needs to be distilled and built around the reality of individual lives. This can call on a range of disciplines and skills: for example, sociology, psychology, philosophy and Islamic moral science.

In madrasahs, the study of Islamic law (*fiqh*) needs to be placed alongside a study of theology (*kalam*) and Islamic philosophy (*falsafah*), with all regarded as important disciplines. The curriculum should also include the social sciences and humanities within the Islamic framework and its perspectives.

## **Citizenship**

Islamic teachings recognise the notion of the citizenship contract between the individual citizen and the state, and emphasise the importance of respecting the contractual obligations one has entered into. Islamic teachings also recognize the naturalness of love of one’s country, or patriotism, that may feed into an active commitment to make a positive difference as a citizen.

While all British citizens have every right to disagree with the political choices of their own government, British soldiers also deserve the support of the citizenry for the difficult work that they do. This of course creates a dilemma for those who do not support particular military campaigns undertaken in their name. This dilemma is one part of the negotiations that people have to make in the complexity of life, and it is one that faces many people across British society, regardless of their faith background.

While there is a great deal of Islamic scholarship that provides a basis for citizenship, there is no strong articulation of citizenship in a modern setting. There is more work to be done by contemporary Muslim thinkers to elaborate the concept of the human being as vicegerent of God (*khalifah*), and to develop a full citizenship theory in the light of the overall objectives of the Shari'ah (*maqasid al-Shari'ah*). More generally in political thought, there is need for more work to produce a systematic articulation of Islamic political philosophy in the modern setting.

The Muslim belief that humans are created as vicegerents of God places responsibilities on them to develop good moral character and to engage with society in a positive way. The Qur'an thus provides a strong basis for active citizenship, which includes influencing, questioning and challenging the state.

It is important for Muslims to help to produce mainstream political discourses in Britain, for example about citizenship, and not merely to consume them. This means that more Muslims should enter fields concerned with producing discourses, such as academia, rather than just traditional fields such as engineering and medicine. Muslims also need to participate in the ongoing discourse about shared values so that they can be part of a national consensus on this subject across all communities. A stronger institutional framework is needed to deliver the messages about citizenship in Islam. There are some excellent Islamic citizenship education programmes, but more are needed. These programmes should aim to translate the wisdom of the Islamic sources into an idiom and a context that speak to the reality of people's lives.

The vision of active engagement in society is embedded in Islamic sacred texts. Performing *khidmah* (service) is a central Islamic value that motivates many Muslims. However, this is often understood in narrow terms such as contributing to the mosque. In reality, *khidmah* is a concept that needs to be applied in wider society beyond the walls of the mosque.

The Qur'an calls Muslims to be active citizens involved in the affairs of their fellow citizens and in addressing the ills of wider society. Currently, however, many in the Muslim community – senior figures as well as the young – lack the confidence and sense of leadership needed to do this. Trustee and leadership skills need to be developed further and taught within the community.

## **Jihad**

Jihad has recently been the subject of intense debate, partly because of the abhorrent misrepresentations promoted by some misguided individuals and groups from within

Muslim communities. In some, stringently defined, circumstances, jihad means the legitimate use of force to defend oneself or to remove a greater evil. In classical Islamic thought, there was a rigorous legal framework for the legitimate use of force – similar to the international law framework today.

Islam is opposed to all forms of terrorism, regardless of who sponsors them. While all legal systems recognise self-defence as a legitimate rationale for the use of force, it is clear that foreign conflicts cannot justify violence in Britain.

Both suicide and suicide bombings are absolutely forbidden (*haram*) in Islam.

There are many ways to respond to oppression other than by fighting. The struggle against injustice can take many forms, such as lobbying, demonstrating, writing and discussing. However, many young people lack the confidence or the skills to protest in these ways; this is an area where more work needs to be done.

## APPENDIX A

*Synopsis of Points for Discussion (which were distributed ahead of each symposium)*

### **I: Muslim Theologies and Pluralisms**

- How do Muslims understand their faith in a world of many religions?
- How should Muslims engage with the religious other?
- How should Muslims engage in interfaith dialogue and community relations?
- How do Muslims deal with conversion both to and from the faith? Is there a theology and law of apostasy and what does it entail in the British context?
- How should Muslims define and pursue the common good?
- Does the language of believer/unbeliever set up boundaries between the self and other that can be divisive both within Muslim communities and without?

### **II: Muslim Thought and the State**

- What is the role of religion in the public sphere?
- Is there space for the articulation of political Islam in Britain?
- What does an Islamic state mean for British Muslims?
- Do Muslims need to live in a state in which the Shari‘ah is respected as the Law of the land? What does that mean?
- What demands, rights and political claims should Muslims make on the state?
- How should Muslims make common cause with the Ummah on matters of global and international politics?
- Is Muslim participation in politics and governance, including the democratic process, the judiciary, the military, parliament and the executive, to be encouraged?

### **III: Muslims and Ethics**

- What are the basic values that a Muslim should hold and how can they be understood in the British context?

- Are there discourses of basic and universal human rights articulated by Muslims and to what extent are they compatible with other conventions either in English Law, or the European Convention or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?
- Should Muslims seek to re-orient their understanding and public articulation of 'Islamic law' towards a more ethical frame, given that Shari'ah in the British context is largely concerned with the moral conduct of individuals and communities?
- How should Muslims engage with debates on gender equality?
- What theological positions are there on sexuality and sexual orientation? Is there a public theology concerning such matters?
- What resources are there in Muslim theologies to combat violence in the name of religion?

#### **IV: Muslims and Participative Citizenship**

- How should Muslims understand the notion of citizenship and of the 'good citizen'? How does it differ from the notion of a 'legal subject'?
- How can Muslims live and participate in secular, liberal democracies?
- Does religion pose an obstacle to full participative citizenship?
- What resources are there in Muslim theologies to encourage active, participative citizenship?
- How should one understand and articulate loyalty? Is patriotism or nationalism preferable? Does loyalty include a sense of honest criticism?
- Should Muslims participate in the armed forces? How should British Muslims handle the situation if Britain goes to war with a Muslim nation?



## GLOSSARY

**'abd:** servant (of God)

**adab:** literature

**'adl:** justice

**amn:** security

**'asabiyyah:** ethnic partisanship or chauvinism

**awqaf:** charitable religious endowments

**dar al-Islam:** the Land of Islam

**falsafah:** philosophy

**faqih:** a legal scholar, trained in *fiqh*

**fatwa:** a legal opinion issued by a *faqih* or legal scholar

**fiqh:** Islamic law or jurisprudence, understood in a wide sense to cover prescriptions for worship and social interaction as well as commercial, civil, family and criminal law.

*Fiqh* is the human expression of the Shari'ah, or the way that Muslim legal scholars have understood and interpreted the Shari'ah over the centuries up to the present day

**fitrah:** intrinsic human nature

**hadith:** a report of what Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) said or did. Authentic *hadith* reports are an important source of ethical and legal precedents in Islamic civilizations

**halal:** permissible in Islam

**haram:** forbidden in Islam

**hijrah:** Prophet Muhammad's (peace and blessings of God be upon him) migration from Makkah to Madinah, in order to set up a religious community

**hilm al-fudul:** "alliance of the virtuous": a

pact made in Makkah before the advent of Islam whereby a small group of influential Meccans undertook to come to the aid of any powerless individual who was subject to abuse by the powerful. Muhammad, who had not begun his Prophethood at that time, was one of the signatories to the pact

**ihsan:** virtue: the correct attitude of mind and spirit that should permeate a believer's actions and interactions

**ijma':** literally: consensus. The process of deriving Islamic law by relying on the consensus of Muslim scholars (traditionally, the third source of law after the Qur'an and *hadith*)

**ijtihad:** intellectual effort, particularly the reasoning used by legal scholars in the process of giving fatwas

**jihad:** literally: struggle or effort. Various used to mean an ethical struggle in society ("jihad" against poverty), a personal struggle to reform one's life, and in some contexts the legitimate use of force

**kafir:** someone who denies or refuses to acknowledge the truth

**kalam:** theological reason

**khilafah:** vicegerency of human beings before God (i.e. their moral responsibility to act as stewards for God's creation); can also mean "caliphate"

**madrasah:** school that teaches the principles and sources of Islam within its curriculum

**maqasid al-Shari'ah:** the objectives or principles of the Shari'ah: including justice, equity, mercy and human well-being

**maslahah:** the public or common good

**qiyas:** The process of deriving Islamic law through analogy with established precedents (traditionally, the fourth source of law after the Qur'an, *hadith* and *ijma'* (consensus)

**Qur'an:** the sacred and foundational text of Islam, revealed to Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him) in the seventh century AD

**Shari'ah:** the path of moral living in Islam, ordained by God: an expression of God's will

**sura:** chapter in the Qur'an

**takfir:** declaring someone to be a *kafir*

**ulama:** Muslim scholars

**ummah:** literally a "people" or "nation" – often used to mean the universal spiritual communion of Muslims, it can also mean a "nation" that includes non-Muslims

**usul:** the foundational sources of Islamic law

**zakah:** charitable alms prescribed by Islam