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CENTRE OF ISLAMIC STUDIES, CAMBRIDGE

The Centre of Islamic Studies seeks to develop a constructive and critical understanding of Islam in the modern world. Its priority is to develop high-quality research and outreach programmes about Islam in the United Kingdom and Europe. Through its roster of scholarship, symposia, reports and interactive educational events, the Centre is committed to engaging with academics, policy-makers and wider society.

CONTEXTUALISING ISLAM IN BRITAIN II
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

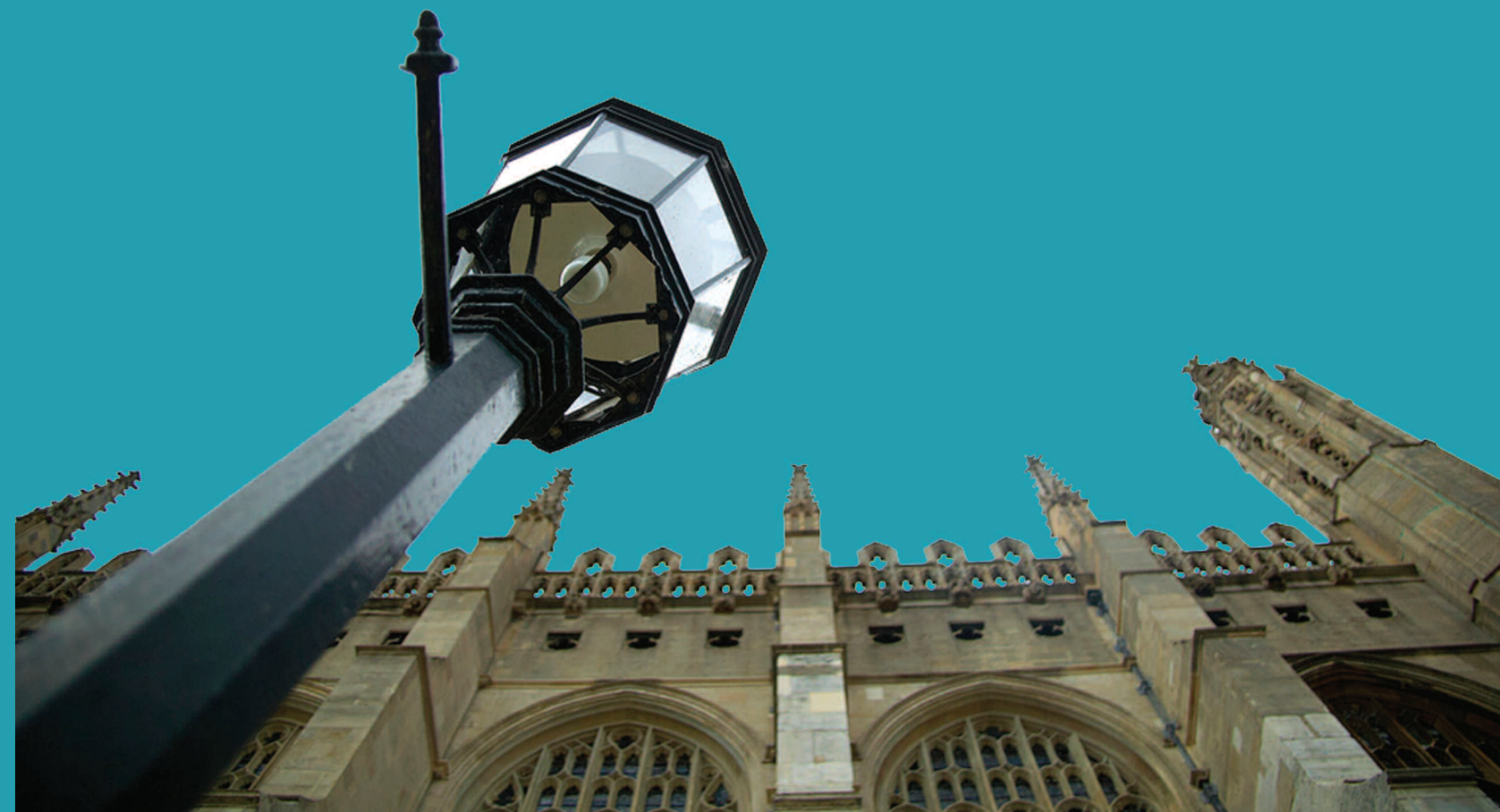## PROJECT LEADER PROFESSOR YASIR SULEIMAN

Director, HRH Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies, Cambridge

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

in Association with

THE UNIVERSITIES OF EXETER AND WESTMINSTER

JANUARY 2012

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Participants (including Steering Committee)

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Secretariat

Saeko Yazaki

Preface

YASIR SULEIMAN

This report represents the collective thinking of a group of British Muslims in the second phase of 'Contextualising Islam in Britain': a project that began in 2008. The first phase culminated in our report *Contextualising Islam in Britain: Exploratory Perspectives*, published in October 2009. In this first report, the project participants set out to answer a central question: what does it mean to live faithfully as a Muslim in Britain today? They did so by considering Muslim views in relation to secularism and the secular nation state, citizenship as a form of political and civic engagement, pluralism, human rights and the Islamic Sharia as a path of moral living.

The present report sets out to answer the same question and to build on the findings of its predecessor. However, it does so by engaging with a new set of issues that impact on the following areas of Muslim belief and practice (appended as questions at the end of this report): (1) the individual and the community, (2) gender: equality, identity and sexuality, (3) education, and (4) wider society and the common good.

In debating these issues, the participants in the second phase of the project delved into whether the balance between the individual and community among Muslims in Britain is in favour of the one or the other. Calling for a rebalancing of this relationship in favour of the individual, the report recognises that commitment and service to the 'community', in its narrow or wide sense, is not at odds with the rights of the individual. For individual rights to be ecologically stable, they must be practised in the full recognition that healthy and sustainable communities can underpin the individual in his or her aspiration to develop and prosper in society. Rampant individualism is not the answer, but neither is a domineering community that expunges informed dissent and opposes responsible progress, even when it is not inconsistent with the fundamentals of faith in Islam.

Investing in the individual and community requires a coherent approach to education that is open to spirituality as well as to the promotion of knowledge in the arts, humanities, social sciences and sciences. Relying on the fundamentals of their faith and past practice in their long and contextually varied traditions, Muslims can be at the vanguard of this holistic form of education which aims to nourish the mind, heart and soul in equal measure. There is in fact a great yearning among Muslims and non-Muslims for a spiritually informed education that can counterbalance the dominance of value-loaded secular learning in a way that can enrich public life with vitality and diversity. The report does not pit spirituality against secular education, but argues for crafting overlapping spaces that offer individuals and communities intersecting paths rather than parallel lines of existence and exclusion.

The issues at stake here are choice and respect for difference and diversity, not just for Muslims but for all. Fears that spirituality would lead to a return to a backward past are unfounded. Education can never be value-neutral, nor should it be. The question then is: what values do we wish to promote through education? There is bound to be more than one answer to this question. In spite of this, it is certain that many will have a substantial common core which can generate convergence towards a common path in a way that underpins the inevitable diversities arising between communities and among members of the same community.

The participants in the project recognised that no discussion of Muslim life in Britain can be complete without engaging with the perennial issues of gender, equality and sexuality in Muslim communities. The report offers a nuanced discussion of these issues, reflecting a variety of views and perspectives that all seek to affirm consistency with what their proponents believe to be the tenets of Islam. The participants agreed that forced marriages and domestic violence have no place in Islam. Forced marriages deny the victims the right to free choice on something absolutely fundamental to their lives. Domestic violence cannot be justified by invoking textual evidence if the Sharia is accepted as a path of moral living, or if Muslims accept the obligation to follow the example of the Prophet who never mistreated his wives or members of his family.

While Muslims may disagree with homosexuality and consider it to be forbidden in Islam, this does not justify treating members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) community with disrespect or violence. Muslims in fact must ensure that members from this community are free of harm. They must also be prepared to debate the issue of sexuality with Muslims and non-Muslims in a non-prejudicial way while holding fast to their beliefs and convictions. This orientation was typified in the debates that took place among participants in the project. Strong views were expressed on all sides, but this was done in a spirit of mutual respect

even when the views expressed clashed with what many participants considered to be unalterable issues of faith.

The project returned to the issues of secularism, the state and civic engagement which had been debated in the first phase. Participants asserted their support for procedural secularism as a form of civic engagement that protects the rights of all faith (and non-faith) communities in the public sphere. Civic engagement is further underpinned by a view of citizenship as a social contract between the individual and the state in which rights and obligations are irrevocably intertwined. A citizen cannot avail himself or herself of the privileges and benefits of citizenship without accepting the responsibilities and obligations that must be exchanged in return. This does not imply a denial of the individual's right to object to state policy or to organise peacefully in favour of his views. On the contrary, active citizenship means the holding of power to account by individuals and groups who use all the legal channels available to them to criticise and offer alternative answers and solutions. Violent extremism is a denial of this contract in democratic states. The majority of Muslims in Britain subscribe to this reading of citizenship. The marginal voices that argue against it do not speak for this majority.

The project was conducted under Chatham House rules. A complete record of the proceedings was produced to use in writing this report. It must however be pointed out that the views expressed in this report cannot be associated with any one participant or with the Project Leader whose name appears on the cover of this report. These views are a compilation of different positions. While they may reflect broad agreements among the participants in some cases, in others they do reflect differences of opinion on some fundamental issues of belief and practice. The report airs, rather than masks, these differences.

The project on which this independent report is based was commissioned in April 2010 and funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government and managed by the Centre of Islamic Studies at the University of Cambridge, in association with the Universities of Exeter and Westminster. As Project Leader, I would like to thank these organisations for their support while, at the same time, pointing out that they do not take responsibility for the content of the report. I would also like to thank the Steering Group of the project for their stewardship and work on developing the questions that guided the symposia, and for choosing the speakers for each symposium. Participants in the project, whose names appear at the beginning of the report, generously contributed their time and ideas. It must however be noted that, while some members attended all four symposia of the project, others attended some of the symposia and not others. To each and every one of them I offer my most sincere thanks. The contribution of the Centre of Islamic Studies at

Cambridge underpinned the process from start to finish. I would like to thank Dr Saeko Yazaki, Outreach Officer at the Centre, for helping organise parts of the project. The Møller Centre hosted the symposia and I thank the staff of the Møller Centre for their contribution to its success. Shiraz Khan designed this publication with her usual care and attention to detail. I thank her for this and for being a loyal friend of the Centre of Islamic Studies since its inception. These thanks extend also to Dr Anas Al-Shaikh-Ali for 'lending' Shiraz to us on many occasions.

But my sincerest and heart-felt thanks are due to Dr Jeremy Henzell-Thomas who compiled the report. In fact, Jeremy did more than compile the report: he gave it form and texture, producing multiple drafts in response to the comments he received from members of the project. In addition to offering his own ideas and constructing an orderly discourse out of the diverse and, at times, meandering debates in the project, Jeremy provided the Glossary and all the endnotes to enhance the accuracy and readability of the report. He did so on all fronts with characteristic understated efficiency, exquisite sensitivity and total commitment to collegiality no matter how many times sections of the report had to be redrafted. The fact that Jeremy did all of this at a difficult time for him and his family makes his achievements all the more remarkable. As Project Leader, I am hugely indebted to him for his dedication, perseverance and, above all, humanity and friendship.

INTRODUCTION

Contextualising Islam

One can be only too aware in these times that any report of candid and probing discussions amongst Muslims seeking to contextualise Islam in Britain needs to be approached with the recognition that every community within Britain has strengths that can contribute positively to the common good. Every community also has to contend with problems and deal with contentious internal issues, some of which may be uniquely associated with a section of that community. Within any community, and within wider society, such a process of honest self-examination may bring to light the need for urgent changes in attitude and practice, so as to correct what is not in harmony with the authentic principles and values it claims to espouse.

All communities have a responsibility to examine themselves, so as to live up to the values and principles that they claim to represent. This is as true of wider British society and the national narratives it may claim to follow as it is of minority communities, whether Muslim or otherwise. A broad alliance of people of goodwill across all communities can play a vital role in helping to renew the core values of pluralism, fairness, moderation, decency and civility which are often upheld and admired as distinctively British.

At the same time, both Muslims and non-Muslims need to explore with integrity and insight how their core beliefs and values converge as shared human values for the benefit of all. Such active mutual engagement is the essence of pluralism, a truth-seeking encounter going far beyond the unchallenging mediocrity of mere tolerance of diversity. The Qur'an tells us that diversity exists so that we may come to know one another, and by so doing to compete with one another in doing good.

Such a vision of the positive benefits of diversity completely transcends that negative caricature which misleadingly associates pluralism with a society of divisive ghettoes, defensive fortresses, adversarial and self-interested pressure groups, non-intersecting

lives, and a Tower of Babel of mutually exclusive and incomprehensible perspectives and belief systems. While indifference and even veiled hostility may sometimes exist between elements of all communities, this should not be seen as representative of the entire community, nor should it sully the gift offered by a plural society for the improvement of all.

There is one factor of great importance in any discussion about the place of Muslims in Britain today, and that is the centrality of faith in the lives of Muslims. Faith-based perspectives on policy need not raise the spectre of theocracy. Yet it is inevitable that Muslim voices, like the voices of any faith community, will be motivated and inspired by their religious beliefs and values in the same way as the concerns of those wedded to humanist ideals will reflect the altruism and moral clarity associated with their ethical and philanthropic principles. So much the better, for the renewal of civilisation and the universality of human values that underpins it depends on an alliance of all people of goodwill across diverse traditions within and between all communities.

It is important to note that the discussions reported here do not represent any single position, perspective or affiliation. The views captured may be variously 'progressive' or more 'traditional', and may also contradict the false assumption that one cannot be both progressive and traditional at the same time. This is not a matter of sending 'mixed messages' but of honouring the intent of the project to capture the richness of prolonged and nuanced discussions amongst a varied group of British Muslims. The project also sought to make the most of the opportunity to explore conceptual spaces that do not conform to rigid definitions or predetermined expectations, either from the inside or the outside. It is that resistance to preconceived agendas and one-dimensional terminology which rightly characterises the disinterested pursuit of truth at the highest level of discourse.

This does not of course mean that the outcome of such discussions is a hotchpotch of contradictory opinions that can offer no enlightenment or direction to Muslim communities nor any insights to other communities on how to conduct a systematic process of self-examination. On the contrary, many recurrent themes emerged throughout the course of the four symposia devoted to the project, and included the following priorities:

• active pluralism, political and social activism, and positive civic engagement for the common good;
• raising the standard of discourse so as to deal effectively with prejudice of all forms;
• an internal critique of culturally determined attitudes and practices that may cause harm and distress;

- better understanding of the problems and needs of young Muslims in contemporary society;
- the restoration of a culture of critical thinking and dialogue, and an associated etiquette governing the civilised handling of disagreement;
- recognition of the value of procedural secularism as an advanced political system that separates freedom of conscience and the assertion of religious beliefs from conduct that contravenes public law;
- the renewal of a comprehensive vision of human faculties and how this might be realised in a broad, holistic education for personal development within school and family.

Above all, what is essentially portrayed in this report is not the angst of a victimised or navel-gazing community, even though it necessarily records valid concerns about disadvantage, exclusion and alienation. Rather, what it points to is the enormous potential held by Muslims as a creative minority within Britain, by virtue of the vital contribution their faith-based principles and values can make to contemporary spiritual, ethical, social and educational renewal for all our people.

The realisation of that potential necessarily depends on the renewal of authentic Islamic principles within Muslim communities themselves. It is also empowered by the readiness of all communities under responsible leadership to engage with each other in recognition of the inestimable benefits to be gained from that pluralism which brings to light shared human values and extends horizons beyond 'tribal' or parochial interests.

Islam once inspired in the West an intellectual enlightenment and scientific revolution through the spirit of enquiry fostered by the Qur'an. The contribution of Muslims to the development of Western civilisation should not, however, be confined to the annals of history and to nostalgic reminders of a golden age of Islamic civilisation. Muslims have much to contribute to the renewal of British society, but this requires a vision that goes beyond a myopic focus on legal rulings and encompasses the full splendour of the finest elements of the Islamic tradition – its richly varied cultural and artistic heritage, its respect for learning and critical enquiry, its moral compass and spiritual depth, and its vision of a fair and just society.

Through the living spiritual and ethical values derived from their faith, Muslims in Britain have the potential to act as a powerfully transformational creative minority within wider society and as a positive force for the common good. Any analysis and critique of problems and controversial issues within Muslim communities in Britain addressed in these pages needs to be seen within the context of that fundamentally creative opportunity.

Executive Summary

Development of the Project

The discussions reported here represent a significant development of the Contextualising Islam in Britain Project. The first stage of this project, *Exploratory Perspectives*, published in 2009, was the culmination of a series of intensive symposia. These created an independent and open space for a group of scholars, activists, and community leaders with a diverse spectrum of views from across Britain's Muslim communities to come together to debate a question of pressing topical importance: what does it mean to live faithfully as a Muslim in Britain today?

The conclusions of the first stage of the project implied or explicitly identified where further work or discussion was needed. The aim of the second stage reported in these pages is therefore to address important new topics or to take further those topics which participants judged to be in need of further discussion.

One particular priority in the evolution of the project was to go further in considering one of the key questions identified in the first stage: how might Islamic theologies and Muslim communities contribute to notions of active citizenship and positive engagement in wider society for the common good? The discussions encompassed other (in some cases, contentious) issues of pressing importance for Muslim communities within contemporary British society, including the relationship between the individual and the community, education, gender equality and justice, and sexuality.

This project, like its predecessor Contextualising Islam in Britain: Exploratory Perspectives, was commissioned by the previous administration. While hosted by the University of Cambridge, it is independent and autonomous of both the University and government.

Rebalancing Individual and Community

Islam has often been regarded as essentially communitarian because of the precedence Muslims may be seen to give to the common good when conflict of interest arises between the individual and the community. It does not, however, demand that the needs of the individual are entirely secondary to community interests. Islam is first and foremost a religion, a moral code, and a way of life which, like all religions, must take the individual as its primary focus.

Participants in the project acknowledged the value of questioning the belief that the elevation of the individual in Western society has been entirely beneficial. Many agreed that unfettered individualism has elevated the expectation of personal entitlement above responsibility, and eroded family and community solidarity. There was, however, broad agreement amongst participants that within Muslim communities the relationship between the individual and the community needs to be rebalanced because it is often still the case that too much weight is given to the community.

Given the undeniable reality of anti-Muslim prejudice within Britain today, undertaking an internal critique amongst Muslims may appear to be a risky strategy which may play into the hands of critics of Islam and Muslims. Participants agreed, however, that it is only through an honest and probing internal critique that Muslim communities can shift their own norms as part of the process of rebalancing the relationship between the individual and the community.

Participants discussed the various ways in which communities can exercise authority over their members: through established power relationships (as in the dynamics of hierarchical gender relations); through insistence on 'tribal' partisanship and loyalty and the maintenance of honour; through avoiding difficult issues so as to preserve the community from public shame; through the conflation of religion and culture; and through inadequate representation of minority, dissenting or discordant views.

More subtle forms of persuasion can be exercised by branding dissent as a subversive attack on the unity and solidarity of the community. Any attempt at reform, no matter how minor, may also be regarded as undermining the core tenets of the faith and the beginning of a dangerous moral decline. Fear of deviation or straying from the straight path, as well as a suspicion of 'innovation', also play a part in the stifling of individual expression. The benefits of safety and security within the community may also be contrasted with the destructive effects, both personal and social, of unbounded liberty and individualism.

Participants agreed that a strong community is not airtight, but open, plural and flexible, and inclusive of creative energies and voices. Muslims need to feel that they have the right to express themselves as individuals and not always toe the line. Scholars may also often have a personal view, but dare not express it in case it offends sections of the community.

Many young Muslims, in particular, are seeking an authentic Islam rooted in the primary sources of the faith, but their understanding of what is authentic (often excavated through their own diligent study and enquiry) may not always be endorsed by those voices within the community which are themselves out of touch with authentic Islamic principles and values.

A recurrent theme raised by participants was the need to recognise the harm and distress that could be caused by certain traditional attitudes and practices within Muslim communities. Participants reiterated throughout the discussions as a whole that the issue of gender equality and justice was of pivotal importance and that no effective rebalancing could occur without bringing Muslim women into the frame.

A Broad and Inclusive *Umma*

Participants also agreed that rebalancing is also dependent on the revival of a broad and inclusive conception of the *umma.* The Prophet Muhammad's vision of the *umma* encompassed the Muslim, Jewish, Christian and pagan communities of Medina, all of whom were brought into the fold of one community or nation. There is a current need for a more complex, multiple concept of *umma* consonant with the broad and inclusive view at the dawn of Islam. This view encompassed wider society, the larger community of people with whom one lives.

An exclusivist mentality that rigidly separates Muslim from non-Muslim identity encourages a more constricted view of the *umma*. The problem of separate communities is exacerbated by the way in which outsiders impose on Muslims the perception of a monolithic community bereft of the richness and diversity characteristic of Muslim life. Muslims can feel trapped by this narrow understanding of Islam and Muslims, and participants agreed that this should be vigorously critiqued.

Supporting Young British Muslims

Participants agreed that there needs to be better understanding and more sensitive handling of the problems and needs of young Muslims in contemporary British society. Young Muslims have to contend with many problems, including social

exclusion, institutional discrimination, poverty and unemployment. Partly as result of these disadvantages, but also because of pressures exercised by community and family, they also face pressing personal issues, especially those concerning faith and identity, relationships, mental health, offending and rehabilitation, sexuality and sexual health.

Participants expressed concern at the harm and distress caused by authoritarian and insensitive engagement with issues within families. Many cases discussed by participants highlighted the way in which personal problems can be exacerbated by harsh parenting (including parental rejection) and how personal welfare may take second place to family 'honour'.

Participants recognised the need for a support system for families and individuals whose problems are compounded by their families. Such support also needs to include advice on how to consider other options apart from rigid 'make or break' or 'all or nothing' approaches which depend on prescriptive rulings and customary regulations divorced from context rather than a compassionate response to an individual case. This will help to promote a more flexible and less dogmatic outlook when approaching complex issues which require humane and sensitive handling within families.

Some young people in distress may go to Imams for help, advice and support. It was recognised that counselling skills needed to be included in the training of Imams, and that vital specialist skills such as arbitration and mediation needed to be learnt. This need was recognised in the 2010 Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) report on the training and development of Imams, which reiterated previous proposals for the continuing professional development of faith leaders in communication, negotiation, representation and other skills that enable them to operate more effectively and confidently within their own communities.

Gender Equality and Justice

In addressing the impact of modernity, the issue of gender equality and justice for women has loomed very large as a symbolic issue, a totem or test case of whether or not Islam, and Muslims, can adjust to the new context of liberal democracies.

Participants agreed that widespread misuse of the topic of 'women in Islam' often serves as a major barrier to meaningful discussion of important issues. A prime example is the ideological alliance between colonialism and feminism which generates shared judgements about the subjugation of women supposedly sanctioned by Islam. Some participants claimed that those who espouse such views

may have no genuine interest in the welfare of Muslim communities, but are very quick to pick up on the issue of Muslim women's rights.

Participants discussed how sexualised and Islamophobic images of Muslim women in the media and popular fiction perpetuate crude stereotypes of them as low-status and submissive victims who need enlightenment and liberation. The concomitant view that Muslim men are violent, oppressive and prone to hyper-masculinity is also reinforced.

Participants agreed, however, that such prejudices should not be taken as an excuse to avoid addressing urgent problems affecting the status and welfare of women in Muslim communities.

Feminism and Islam

Participants acknowledged that Western feminism has made an outstanding contribution towards securing dignity for women, but they also recognised how it diverges fundamentally from Islam in ignoring the importance of faith. While it is vital to engage with feminist ideas that promote gender equality and justice, they need to be rooted in a theological context if they are to be relevant to Muslims. It is a strongly held belief amongst Muslim women that Islam contains within it the resources to allow them to challenge injustice and oppression within their own communities. Some participants nevertheless upheld that this belief should not prevent Muslim women from making use of legitimate arguments from outside their own tradition as a precious source of ideas and experience.

It is distinctly unhelpful when some feminists respond to Muslim women who choose to affirm their faith by insisting that they need to be re-educated and even exit their faith community. This is a significant barrier to Muslim women who would like to establish positive political and feminist alliances that would assist them in the monumental task of challenging the power of men within their own communities.

Patriarchy

The Qur'an makes it clear that men and women have the same essential nature or primordial disposition, the same intellectual and spiritual faculties, and the same responsibility as moral agents of God to uphold justice. It has been claimed that the Qur'an initiated a process to move the believer, as a person and a member of a just social order, beyond patriarchy. It therefore needs to be asked whether Muslims have succeeded in fulfilling gender justice to the extent envisioned in the Qur'an.

Participants discussed how harm and distress may be caused, especially to women, by patriarchal structures within Muslim communities. They also discussed the importance of acknowledging and addressing the risk faced by vulnerable members within a minority group, such as women, whose rights as citizens may be compromised by the grant of public recognition to traditional rules and practices, as in the accommodation of Muslim family law. One solution would be to accept that human rights law provides the minimum floor which binds all the parties and which justifies state intervention to safeguard the rights of women.

Participants discussed the problem of inadequate access to mosques for Muslim women in Britain. The attendance of women in mosques is restricted not only by inequality of access, but also by reference to Islamic sources which ordain that attendance at Friday prayers is compulsory for men but only optional for women. It is also perpetuated by entrenched attitudes and practices that reinforce discrimination and exclusion. Women also need a better understanding of their rights, as well as greater confidence to take the initiative in exercising them.

Masculinism and the Devaluation of the Feminine

The idea that gender roles are socially constructed rather than innate has particular importance at this time for Muslim communities when a major corrective is necessary to promote gender equality and justice for women. It is important, however, to acknowledge that fundamental equality is not necessarily negated by accepting that men and women could have different and complementary gender characteristics and roles. By the same token, some women may themselves wish to adopt roles which have been traditionally assigned to women.

Masculinism and the concomitant devaluation of the feminine are major problems of our times. Participants discussed the way in which gender equality can be reduced and distorted to merely competing with men on male terms, and how this entails a corresponding devaluation of traditional feminine qualities and roles. The dogma consistent with feminist ideology that only work in the world is of any value has led to the downgrading of the 'non-working' world, a gross injustice to those who perform so much work of inestimable value in the home.

Some believed that social fragmentation can be attributed in many ways to the undermining of women through lack of understanding and appreciation of their critical roles as nurturers, carers, motivators, educators, counsellors and sympathisers. They also upheld that principles of mutuality and nurture can play an important part in resisting such fragmentation, which is regarded by many as a current sign of wider civilisational crisis.

Others emphasised that it is important not to essentialise nurturing roles to such an extent that they are regarded as the only jobs suited to women. In the same way, it is important to challenge the fixed idea that domestic work is entirely a woman's domain. There is a need for more balance in terms of the roles of men and women at home, in the workplace and in wider society.

Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation, and the issues it raises about what is and what is not deemed to be permissible, represent a controversial and volatile subject, not only within Muslim communities but within other faith groups and within wider society. This applies particularly to homosexual or same-sex orientation, although it is more precise and encompassing to talk about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) orientations.

Only very recently have works begun to appear that tackle the complex and controversial issue of homosexuality in Islam from a religious perspective. Such works argue that Muslims can reconcile themselves to the inevitable sexual diversity in society without compromising their principles. They may also advocate a liberation theology, pointing out that Islam began as a process to end injustice, and that God's will works with and through those who suffer oppression. Just as there can be no progressive interpretation of Islam without gender equality and justice for women, so it can be argued that neither can there be renewal of authentic Islamic principles of justice relevant to the contemporary world without tackling intolerance, abuse, discrimination and harm based on sexual orientation.

Allied to this approach is the claim that there are no verses in the Qur'an which unambiguously condemn homosexuals and that those *hadith* which condemn homosexual and transgender people are of dubious authenticity.

One highly controversial aspect of the critique of prevailing attitudes to same sex relations in Islam is to interpret certain Qur'anic verses so as to suggest that the Qur'an does not express any moral condemnation or impose any legal sanction on homosexual people. Many participants objected strongly to what they regarded as serious misinterpretation and unjustifiable extrapolation of Qur'anic verses to justify same-sex relations. While all agreed that Muslims should support the right of LGBT individuals to be protected from discrimination, harassment and persecution under the law, many firmly upheld that it is wrong to misuse Qur'anic verses and exploit them in an attempt to construct, or at worst fabricate, a theological argument as a justification for homosexuality. This is not a productive strategy in the cause of

advancing greater tolerance of homosexuals because it lacks credibility and would be widely rejected within Muslim communities. It has to be accepted that the meaning of some verses cannot be 'creatively' manipulated in this way. This is not to say, however, that such verses, and other texts, can be exploited to justify illegal and unacceptable treatment of LGBT individuals and groups.

All faith communities, including Muslims, are faced with similar conflicts in relation to gender or sexuality. Participants agreed that while certain beliefs may be sincerely held, they cannot be acted upon to violate the rights of others through discrimination or persecution. Whatever might be proscribed as 'sins' as a matter of personal conviction clearly cannot all be translated into legal rulings and imposed on others. This is not only a matter of conforming meticulously to the law of the land wherever it regulates such matters, but is also a matter of abiding by the fundamental principle of mercy in governing relationships and fostering kindness, harmony and reconciliation within family and community.

Case studies have identified a range of serious personal and social problems caused by attitudes and practices that are intolerant of LGBT individuals, as well as inner conflicts and struggles which cause great personal suffering. Ill-treatment, neglect and lack of care of such individuals within Muslim communities can no longer be ignored but need to be recognised, acknowledged and dealt with responsibly and compassionately.

While all acknowledged the importance of a sensitive understanding of sexual diversity, and emphasised that LGBT individuals should be legally protected from discrimination and persecution, there was nevertheless strong support amongst participants for the view that heterosexuality is the only norm explicitly supported by Islamic teachings.

Participants upheld the need for the reclamation and implementation of the proper Islamic ethics and etiquette for engaging in respectful debate and disagreement in a plural world and a plural Islam. At the same time, it was emphasised that this principle must not negate the equally important freedom to express one's sincerely held beliefs. The debate on interpretation of religious teachings should be open and frank, as religious views are a matter of conviction and conscience. Muslims uphold their collective duty to convey to mankind what they believe to be the true and complete divine message entrusted to them without any evasion or distortion.

Islamic Education in a Secular Context

Participants discussed various issues and challenges arising from the perceived need to rethink the concept and practice of Islamic education in a secular context.

Muslim Educational Settings

Although traditional Islamic education should (and in most cases does) begin at home, it is formally and systematically conducted through the supplementary school (madrasa), which plays a major role in developing the Islamic identity of Muslim children.

In the absence of rigorous research data, most of the observations about the educational culture in traditional madrasas remain anecdotal, and it is important not to generalise. Participants discussed how some teachers may not only lack proficiency in English, but also lack proper teaching qualifications and the basic pedagogic skills essential not only for providing opportunities for discussion, interpretation and critical thinking, but also for contextualising Islam within contemporary Britain.

Participants also discussed the claim that madrasa education generally relies heavily on rote learning and copying down from authoritative sources, a methodology associated with an authoritarian and controlling attitude to the transmission of knowledge. Some participants expressed concern that the prevalent 'transmission/ instruction-centred' Islamic approach to education might foster and reinforce foreclosed and rigid religiosities among British Muslim youth. Many expressed the view that there is a pressing need for a more child-centred approach in Muslim educational settings.

With regard to child protection, participants expressed concern at successive reports of unacceptable physical punishment of children at some madrasas in Britain, and the way in which parents may turn a blind eye to it either because they accept it as normal practice or because they fear that if they act as whistle-blowers they will be ostracised by the community. Cases of sexual abuse at madrasas have also been reported. Such mistreatment has been vigorously condemned by Muslim organisations which uphold that the standards of child protection in mainstream schools should operate without fail in Islamic educational settings.

Another key challenge is the need to integrate Muslim seminaries which train religious leaders into the wider British educational system so that their qualifications are recognised as equivalent to undergraduate degrees. This would enable their

graduates to enter the main routes of professional or academic development, including teacher training courses. An important step in this direction was taken with the publication of the DCLG report on the training and development of Muslim faith leaders in 2010.

Despite these concerns, it was acknowledged that madrasas are undoubtedly important educational institutions that shape the religious leadership and wider Islamic activism within Muslim communities. As such, they need to be invested in, regulated and improved so that they may more effectively respond to the challenges facing these communities.

The most innovative madrasas not only teach the standard curriculum, but encourage discussion and debate about what it means to be a Muslim in Britain today. One such model of madrasa education discussed by participants builds into the educational experience many of the professional dimensions of mainstream education. These include staff development programmes designed to improve teaching methodology and ensure adequate child protection, as well as enhanced parental involvement.

Participants observed that biased and ideologically motivated critiques of some Muslim schools unsupported by credible evidence often only serve to provoke a natural defensiveness which makes it more difficult to address legitimate concerns about the quality of education in such schools. There have been successive attacks of this nature orchestrated by think tanks and in the media.

Nevertheless, whatever bias and misrepresentation have been perpetrated in attacks on Muslim schools, and irrespective of the need for careful and intelligent critiquing of such attacks, a comprehensive review of the concept of Islamic education and Muslim educational practice is needed. However, the fact that Muslim schools function under such hostile scrutiny raises an important issue of balance. Review of educational philosophy, practice and standards needs to be a continuous process in all schools, and Muslim schools are no exception. At the same time, there needs to be an ongoing conversation which encourages critics to examine whether their position is rooted in bias or based on credible evidence.

Muslim Pupils in Mainstream Schools

Approximately 97% of Muslim pupils in Britain are educated in mainstream schools. Participants discussed the view that, given the current climate in which there is much negative portrayal of Islam and Muslims, greater priority should be given to ensuring

that the needs of Muslim pupils in mainstream schools are appropriately accommodated.

The Equality Act 2010 constitutes groundbreaking legislation in including religion and belief as a 'protected characteristic' in the same way as age, disability, ethnicity and race, gender, gender identity, sexual identity and orientation, and others. The 'Every Child Matters' agenda applies to all, including the specific needs of Muslim pupils. Failure to recognise, affirm and include the faith identity and religious needs of Muslim pupils may not only alienate pupils and make them feel that they are not valued, but may also give rise to inappropriate assumptions that in order to progress in society they will have to compromise or give up aspects of their core identity, including their religious beliefs and values.

Many participants took the view that there was a need for Muslims to engage more actively and positively with the educational process within mainstream schools. Some felt strongly, however, that such participation should not reflect an 'us and them' approach by which Muslims sought to engage in the decision-making only to advocate parochial Muslim interests. They believed that Muslims, as British citizens, should not see themselves as different from anyone else, but should have regard to the wider needs of all children in mainstream schools, not focusing solely on issues of exclusion and the perceived lack of recognition of Muslim identity.

It is also the case that there is no absolute right for the accommodation of specific religious or cultural needs, and there is variation in the extent to which schools accommodate such needs. The majority of schools do not have a policy of accommodation, and opposition to special provision is often a principled stance based on the belief that it is fundamentally divisive, rather than simply a matter of logistics or lack of appropriate facilities.

Participants agreed that, despite evidence of high achievement in some Muslim faith schools, there is an urgent need to address the underachievement of Muslims within the educational system as a whole. Almost one third of Muslims of working age (16-64) have no educational qualifications, the highest proportion for any faith group, whereas the most recent official figure for the population at large is, on average, one in nine. Fewer Muslim 16-year-olds are in education, training or employment than any other group of the same age. Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin pupils have consistently performed below the average for all pupils on every scale of the Foundation Stage profile and have consistently lower levels of attainment than most other ethnic groups across all key stages. They also experience high rates of incidence of Special Educational Needs.

Islamic Education as Holistic Education

Participants discussed ways in which Islamic education can legitimately be said to converge with the broad rationale of holistic education which emphasises the balanced development of human faculties. A comprehensive and integrated concept of Islamic education ideally encompasses not only the instruction and training of the mind and the transmission of knowledge, but also the nurture of the whole being, moral discipline, and learning from one another in the spirit of critical openness and respect for diversity. The teacher is therefore not only an instructor and transmitter of knowledge, but also a developer of character and nurturer of souls. This broad and balanced curriculum converges in many ways with the stated goals of the National Curriculum, which is designed to encompass not only the acquisition of knowledge and skills, but also personal, social, moral and spiritual development.

Participants discussed the educational philosophy and practice of certain school systems in the Muslim world which have adopted more holistic approaches that go beyond the dichotomy between secular and religious education. A common thread in many of these alternative models is a strong emphasis on inter-cultural studies, which may include the study of other faiths, so as to foster dialogue, tolerance, peaceful coexistence and integration within wider society. These schools do not seek to subvert modern secular states but promote an inclusive ideal that encourages practising Muslims to embrace modernity and the opportunities it affords. The holistic nature of such an educational vision is also implemented in the emphasis it places on extra-curricular activities, ethical values, character building, and service to the common good.

Participants discussed various priorities and challenges in implementing a holistic vision of education. These include the revival of critical thinking, active learning through talk and discussion, participation in creative and expressive arts, education in the humanities, the benefits of multi-faith Religious Education, and community service.

The Crucial Role of the Family

Participants agreed that the role of the family is absolutely central in implementing a range of opportunities for the education of the whole child. The family is, in fact, the very foundation of a truly holistic education.

It is obvious that moral and spiritual development in schools builds on the child's experience in the home, but it is also important to realise that the family can provide

many opportunities for extra-curricular activities, such as engagement in the creative arts, cultural and sporting activities, nature activities and community service.

Real concerns about the quality of education in schools is also driving a marked increase in the number of parents opting out of the system altogether and choosing home-schooling for their children. Motives for doing so vary greatly, including justifiable concerns about poor discipline in schools, lack of moral and spiritual education, bullying, excessive testing, and lack of stimulation for able and gifted children.

The quality of discourse and relationships within family and social life also initiates and reinforces the acquisition of the knowledge and skills which typify a genuine community of enquiry committed to lifelong learning. Holistic education in its deepest sense is fostered within a family circle centred on vibrant conversation, discussion, respect for alternative views and the open exploration of ideas, as well as the transmission of traditional wisdom and values. A talking culture within families is also an essential aspect of the reclamation of a culture of personal care, which can provide children with emotional resilience and a sense of personal responsibility.

A range of virtues is transmitted from generation to generation through proper education, upbringing and, above all, through inspiring examples set by elders and role models. Such people may be ancestors, parents, teachers, mentors or other exemplary characters either from the past or in the present. Given the demographic reality that more than half of British Muslims are under 25 years of age (the most youthful profile of any faith community), it can hardly be emphasised enough that the proper nurture of young British Muslims and the welfare of future generations depend crucially on quality of leadership and guidance within family and community. The same applies, of course, to all young people within all communities in Britain today.

Political Participation, Civic Engagement and Social Activism

While participants acknowledged that Muslims face many genuine difficulties, barriers, and restrictive assumptions, they discussed the many opportunities at this time for Muslims to transcend parochial 'Muslim' issues and engage positively with wider society for the common good.

Deprivation, Disadvantage and Public Hostility

Participants discussed the range of problems faced by post-diaspora Muslims. Some of these problems are more or less specific to Muslim communities, while others are

found in other minority communities, including Sikhs, Hindus and Balkan Christians, as well as in wider society.

Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities are shown to be disadvantaged by most of the key indicators of economic and social well-being. It is also apparent that many communities of Muslim heritage are the most ethnically/racially disadvantaged and deprived. Muslims have the lowest employment rate and the highest economic inactivity rate of any group. The majority of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children are living in households below the poverty line. Muslims also have the highest rates of reported ill health.

It is officially acknowledged that Muslims are experiencing anti-Muslim prejudice (Islamophobia) both personally and institutionally through forms of marginalisation, discrimination and stereotyping. It has been claimed that Islamophobia is not only widespread but also socially acceptable in Britain today. Despite the fact that most Muslims in Britain strongly identify as British, only one in three of the general population believe Muslims are loyal citizens, and such serious misperceptions are heightened by a mainstream media narrative which increasingly projects Islam and Muslims as a threat to traditional British customs, values and ways of life.

This rising trend of social polarisation illustrates that the prevailing British public discourse on Islam is fundamentally concerned with whether the religion is compatible with the liberal, democratic and secular norms and values of modern British and Western societies. Far-right fringe groups have been able to feed off a growing sense of suspicion within wider society toward Muslim minorities in their midst.

Participants discussed the factors driving the process of social polarisation. While there are many interrelated historical, socio-political, geopolitical, economic and cultural factors at play, it is possible to identify a deepening sense of social crisis as a prominent source of the problem. Widespread anxieties about economic recession, unemployment, inflation, violent conflict, and terrorism, for instance, can often be projected onto minority social groups who are seen as outsiders. Historians of mass violence point out that it is the blaming of such groups which may often initiate the processes that lead to genocide.

Barriers to Political Participation

Participants discussed the restrictive assumptions and myths which represent a barrier to greater political participation by Muslims.

There is widespread assumption that religious identity is the main factor driving political participation by Muslims. This has created the restrictive expectation that their participation in politics and public discourse is conditioned by their being Muslim first, and British second. As a result, there may be negative reactions to Muslims who speak about issues of general public interest or matters not identifiable as specifically 'Muslim'. Such matters may be seen as outside the legitimate territory allotted to and occupied by Muslims.

While Muslims have often been accused of falling short in their involvement in the political process, attempts to mobilise the Muslim vote have invariably been met with apprehension, criticism, and accusations of allegiance to foreign agendas and groups.

An additional impediment is the myth of a monolithic 'Muslim community'. Many countries of origin and various heritages are represented in Britain's highly diverse Muslim communities. Participants emphasised that a proper understanding of Muslim communities in Britain must take into account the diversity of cultural and religious practices, pre-migration status, settlement histories, geographies and socio-economic conditions within these communities. Failure to grasp this complexity may lead to inappropriate and unsuccessful public policy initiatives for engaging with and working with Muslim communities. The current climate of highly-charged debate around multiculturalism, integration and cohesion has only compounded this complexity.

It was reiterated by participants throughout the discussions that it is important for Muslims not to be confined within an exclusively Muslim identity concerned only with parochial Muslim issues. Muslims have the right and duty as responsible British citizens to speak out on issues that concern wider society. Some also questioned the mentality of 'Islamisation', the perceived need to relate everything to Islamic tradition, believing it to be a handicap which needs to be transcended. In the same way, they added, there may be no need to consult a detailed manual of Islamic rulings for guidance on the minutiae of every conceivable issue.

Active Citizenship, Community Spirit and the Common Good

Participants discussed the importance of recognising that the political sphere encompasses not only the political structures of the state at national and local levels but also the civic engagement and social activism generated by individuals and communities at the grass roots level.

Participants affirmed that tolerance towards faith communities and the inclusion of religious voices in the public sphere are integral to the British conception of

'secularity'. People of faith have the democratic right to contest issues in public discourse and to champion values rooted in their faith traditions.

Faith groups have long played an important role in public life at local and national levels. The positive contributions they make to public life are deeply rooted in their traditions of social action and underpinned by a strong commitment to values that promote stewardship, social and economic justice, and public service.

The 'Big Society' agenda of the present government, aiming to recast models of partnership between the state and communities, has significant implications for faith groups. Central to this new public policy agenda is a vision of active citizenship, with people from different communities coming together, independent of government, to solve local problems. There is a natural affinity between a positive vision of the Big Society and Islamic principles, given the strong emphasis in Islam on charity and good deeds.

Participants recognised that faith groups represent a powerful community resource with a deep reach into communities, particularly to the most marginalised groups. They provide a level of continuity and sustained support that is hard for other voluntary organisations to match.

Two words perhaps sum up the most pressing imperatives: 'engage' and 'collaborate'. Participants agreed that, given the Qur'anic principle of a community of people standing up for what is right and discouraging what is wrong, it should not be difficult for Muslims to understand the vital importance of engagement and participation as the essential route to societal transformation based on ethical values. Similarly, the Qur'anic principle of pluralism enshrines an unequivocal call for active engagement with others as a means of discovering truth and advancing justice.

Participants discussed the many channels and mechanisms apart from political parties for political engagement. These range from the family unit and the neighbourhood to mosques and community centres, Muslim organisations, local schools, and online communities. Muslims can also actively demonstrate their concern about various issues by becoming involved in campaigns which seek to benefit wider society and contribute to the public good. This requires the consciousness of wider social responsibility which goes beyond an often exclusive or disproportionate focus on foreign policy and 'Muslim issues'.

There is evidence that young Muslims in particular are idealistic about their participation in society as moral individuals, and are strongly engaged with issues of citizenship centred on community. Such findings give strong credence to the view

of Muslims as 'model citizens' revealed by a Gallup Poll conducted in 2007. Qualities of good citizenship were widely embodied by Muslims during the riots which disfigured English towns and cities in August 2011. It is important to bring this to public attention, especially when sections of the media are so quick to print negative headlines about Muslims on the flimsiest of pretexts.

Participants discussed how the higher moral objectives (*maqasid*) enshrined in the Qur'an and the Prophetic model of governance establish a constructive ethical framework which is axiomatically peaceful, inclusive, pluralistic and respectful of liberty of conscience within the secular public space. Such principles empower Muslims to participate fully as citizens in working towards ideas, laws, institutions, norms and values which protect civil rights and political freedoms, defend cultural and religious diversity, champion social and economic justice, and promote responsibility for the environment. In such a way, a new Islamic public theology can be advanced: one which fosters a vibrant and confident social activism in support of an open-ended and dynamic radical politics for the continued progressive transformation of society.

A renewed Islamic public theology offers rich resources for a broad alliance of citizens to develop inclusive and collective responses to the many interconnected and deepening crises in the contemporary world.

All communities need to be wary of claiming exclusive ownership of universal human values for the partisan purpose of asserting ethnic or national superiority or claiming special dispensation to act as moral exemplars for all mankind. Rather, all citizens and communities, no matter what their affiliation, need to work together to reclaim those shared universal principles and core human values which transcend national, cultural, ideological and religious divides.