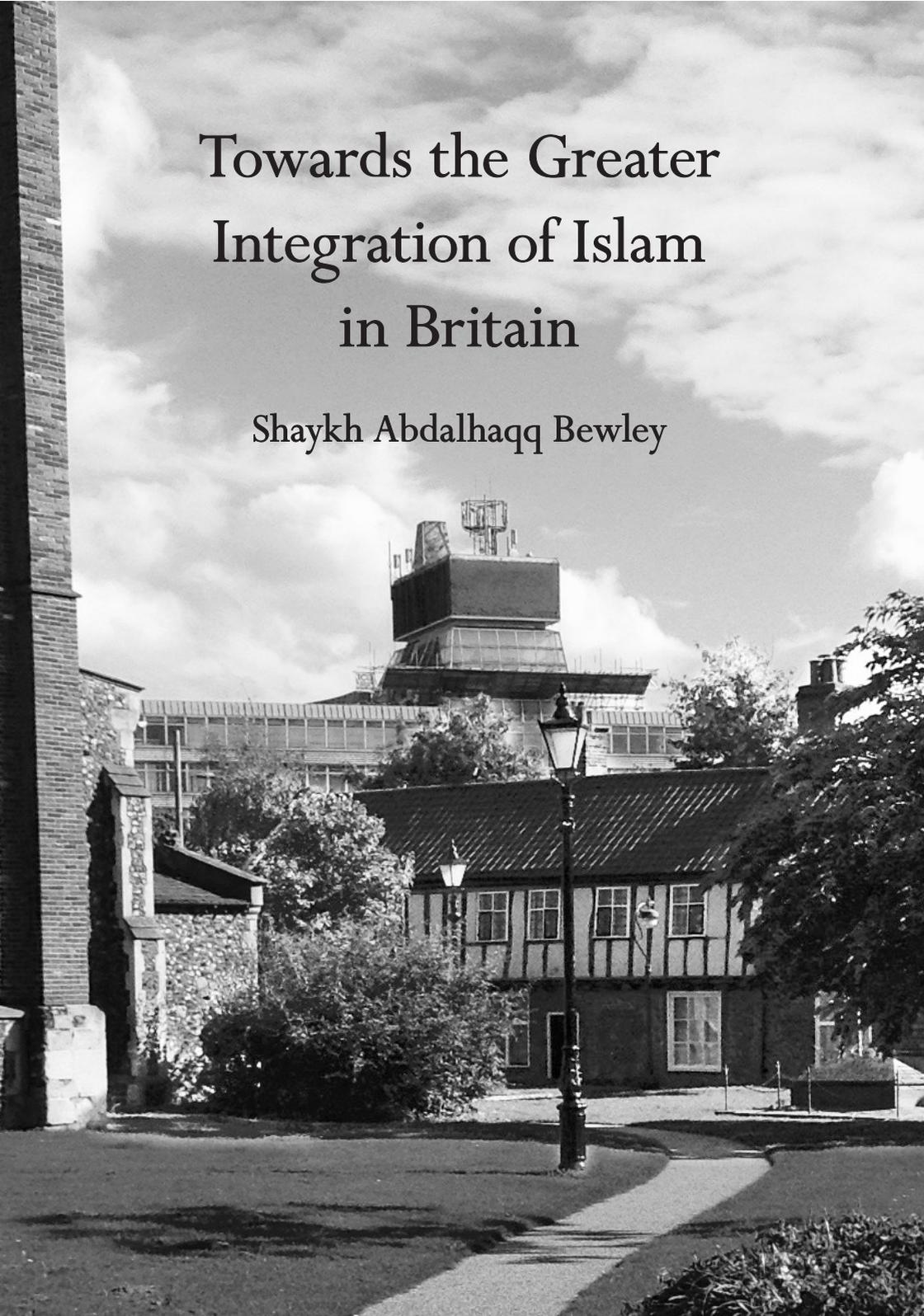


Towards the Greater Integration of Islam in Britain

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It is abundantly clear from the recent spate of terrorist attacks, almost all carried out by young Muslim men domiciled in the countries where those attacks have taken place, that much, much more needs to be done to integrate Muslims in the West into the societies where they are now living. It stands to reason that if these young men really felt that they belonged, were really at home, in the places where they lived, they would be far less likely to go on the murderous rampages which have cost the lives and futures of so many of their fellow countrymen and women. The question which faces us in Britain in 2017, particularly after the terrorist outrages of the past year, is how this present outbreak of violent extremism, most of which has been carried out in the name of Islam, can best be counteracted and eliminated.

In his recent book, *Age of Anger*, Pankaj Mishra incisively demonstrates that the present wave of terrorist atrocities cannot be viewed in isolation and must be seen as part of a historical continuum that found its origins in the 18th century in the sweeping intellectual, social, economic and moral dislocation brought about by European Enlightenment thinking. This ushered in a new way of looking at the world and instigated profound changes in the political and social landscape, which are still being felt to this day. The new worldview was seminally voiced in opposite ways by the cynical and venally opportunistic rationalism of Voltaire and the insightful but despairing idealism of Rousseau and found political expression in the violent convulsions of the American war of independence and then, shortly afterwards, the French revolution, in which the idea of “terror” as political policy was openly advocated. Political activity

inspired by Enlightenment thinking continued throughout the 19th century in various guises, often taking the form of revolutionary and nationalist movements and morphing, in an extreme manifestation, into the nihilist anarchism of Bakunin and his many acolytes at the end of that century. In the 20th century its influence can be clearly seen in the run-up to the two great wars of its first half and in its second half in the anti-colonialist and nationalist movements of Africa, America and Asia, which can also be traced back to the same intellectual wellspring.

This is not the time or place to go onto any detailed examination of this phenomenon but I would recommend Pankaj Mishra's book as a starting point for anyone who wants to delve deeper into it. In the present context, however, a salient aspect of it to highlight is that one of the main planks of the Enlightenment was to definitively declare the basic equality of all human beings. The problem with this admirable assertion has always been that in practice in every jurisdiction where it has been asserted some human beings have always been vastly more equal than others! The concept of equality has, in fact, only ever applied to a very few socially and economically advantaged individuals, leaving in every instance the vast majority of the population of the countries concerned in a state of extreme inequality. And this has been the case all through the last two centuries ever since these universal rights of man have been vaunted as a common human inheritance.

At the same time things like education and mass communication have proliferated, which has resulted in huge numbers of the population of the world being conscious that they are being told one thing but experiencing something very different. This in turn has resulted in untold numbers of people desperately aspiring to a social status and a standard of living that is in reality always beyond their reach. The outcome of this state of never satisfied aspiration is inevitably the negative energy known as resentment, defined by Mishra as "an existential resentment of other people's

being, caused by an intense mix of envy and sense of humiliation and powerlessness.” Or in Hannah Arendt’s trenchant phrase, “a tremendous increase in mutual hatred and a somewhat universal irritability of everybody against everybody else.”

Now I realise that this may seem an unwarrantedly sweeping generalisation but many others have spent a lot of time and energy looking in great depth at this matter and have reached the same conclusion. The point I am making is that this resentment has been in one form or another *a*, or perhaps even *the*, dominant force behind almost all the political movements of the past two centuries. In the 21st century the Tamil separatists of Sri Lanka, the Hindu nationalists in India, and even the Occupy Wall Street movement, Brexit, and Donald Trump’s election, all owe much of their momentum to the resentment of many of their supporters and crucially, in the context of this discussion, so do al-Qaida and ISIS. It is not that the political or nationalist or racist or religious doctrines and rhetoric espoused by such groupings over the last two hundred years have played no part at all in the fanatical radicalisation of some of their members, it is just that the driving force behind them is in every case the same, that resentment felt by their adherents, which in its extreme form manifests in the nihilistic violence we have so often witnessed in recent times.

The nihilists, anarchists and terrorists who have flourished over the last two centuries in almost every continent, often against a historical backdrop of cosy political-financial alliances, devastating economic crises and obscene inequalities, have acted in the name of a multitude of different causes and justified their violence in many different ways and yet in a fundamental way their motivation is always the same and stems from a deep discontentment with the situation they find themselves in – a kind of alienation from the society within which they live. It would seem, then, that the politically inspired terrorist atrocities of the 19th century and religiously inspired ones of the 21st have a decisive common denominator. As Mishra says,

it is necessary to understand “...how the educated young Russian, lurching between the artificial world of francophone Petersburg and the greater abject mass of pre-modern Russia, outlined the emotional and ideological spectrum that many young Asians and Africans inhabit today.”

Within the European context this is not that hard to answer, particularly where the Muslim community is concerned. Huge numbers of South Asian and North African Muslims, already smarting from many years of colonial subjugation, emigrate to the homeland of their previous colonial masters in search of, and often with the promise of, a better life, which in most cases is never, or only very partially, realised. At the same time, they are never really accepted by the host community of the country where they live and so there is an inevitable feeling of alienation, of not really belonging in the place which, especially in the case of second and third generation immigrants, is now the only place they can call home. And this is exacerbated in the case of these later generations by the fact that they do not feel at home in their parents' country of origin either. Nor is the situation improved by the minority of members of these communities who are “successful” in the new environment. That simply adds more fuel to the discontentment felt by the great majority of the immigrant community involved. It is, in other words, an archetypal, fertile seedbed for the generation of deep resentment.

When you have hundreds of thousands of people in this situation it is easy to see – and as I have said there are many historical precedents for it – how a tiny minority of them can be persuaded to act out their feelings of humiliation, envy and powerlessness by lashing out against their perceived enemy with extreme forms of violent retaliation. As I have also intimated, in the case of these young Muslims – as in the case of their numerous terrorist predecessors, who committed similar atrocities in the name of different causes and ideologies – the primary impetus for their actions is not so much the doctrine

they espouse but rather the mindset that causes them, or makes it easy for them, to adopt that doctrine and use it as an excuse for the venting of their hidden rage. It is the alienation they feel from the people they live among, the hypocrisy that seems to be inherent in the political system that governs them, whose rhetoric is so far from their lived experience, and the fantasy of an ideal society where all these wrongs will be righted, this is what lies behind the violently vindictive course they follow.

This means that the actual doctrine used to justify their nihilistic violence – in their case a perverted interpretation of Islam but in the case of their predecessors any number of different political or nationalist causes – in fact only plays a subsidiary role in their subsequent behaviour. It is not that their indoctrinators, whether in person or through the internet, do not indeed feed them with material that persuades them to act in the way that they do, they certainly do that. It is just that their state of resentment predisposes them to listen to the poisonous propaganda they are fed and be persuaded by it. So it is their inherent state of mind rather the doctrine itself that is the primary cause of what later takes place. The reason I am saying all this is because the powers that be in this country have persuaded themselves, or been persuaded, that the true cause of this recent terrorist activity in the name of Islam is something they term the “ideology of Islamic extremism”. David Cameron, backed to the hilt by the present Prime Minister, made this explicit in a speech he made on the subject in July 2015, in which he said “...the root cause of the threat we face is the extremist ideology itself.” In making this assertion and, indeed, in acting on it, and failing to recognise the real, underlying cause of what is happening, a serious mistake is being made, one that is, in fact, exacerbating the very phenomenon the government say they are trying to eradicate. By focusing on “violent extremism” and making combating that their sole tactic they are tilting at completely the wrong windmill.

Even their own people have indicated that the true cause of these terrorist atrocities may lie elsewhere. The Director General of the Home Office's Office for Security and Counter Terrorism, Charles Farr, is recorded as saying in a report about the terrorists: "It's not to say the challenges they pose are not significant, they are. But ... the background of broken families, lack of integration into what we might call mainstream society, some level of criminality, sometimes family conflict, are all more than normally apparent... People join terrorist organisations in this country and in others because they get something out of them beyond merely satisfaction of an ideological commitment. Sometimes it's about resolution of personal problems, sometimes it's about certainty in an environment which has deprived them of it, sometimes it's about excitement and esteem, and we should not omit the last two factors. This is the reality in Syria and Iraq but also many other contexts we've worked on over the past five or 10 years." And what is that if it is not a precise description of the classic conditions for the generation of resentment. And Professor Andrew Silke – a counter-terrorism specialist who advises the Cabinet Office and the UN – maintains that research shows that people are drawn to terrorism more because of "identity issues" than ideology. He says: "The evidence isn't there to say ideology is the prime reason why people are becoming terrorists, and yet ideology is the foundation on which the counterterrorism effort is built. Everything is pitched in terms of counter-ideology, even though ideology is not the prime mover in terms of bringing people into terrorism. That is a mistake. It is not going to be effective in terms of preventing people becoming radicalised. And it diverts attention from other causes which play a role in why people become involved in terrorism."

Farr also said in the report quoted above: "...the more we overstate them [the challenges] the more, frankly, we risk labelling Muslim communities as somehow intrinsically extremist, which actually despite an unprecedented wealth of social media propaganda, they

have proved not to be. So I think we need to be cautious with our metaphors and with our numbers...” and this is where the counterproductive element in the current strategy I referred to just now raises its head. There is no doubt at all that present government policy has made the Muslim community, which was already under attack in many sections of the media and therefore public opinion, before these latest initiatives, feel even more beleaguered and browbeaten than it previously was. An overwhelming body of evidence, built up over the past two or three years, shows this assertion to be in no sense an over-generalisation of the present mindset of the British Muslim community, but for my present purpose I will make do with quoting from the painstaking research carried out by the respected journalist and author, James Fergusson, who recently spent more than a year traveling round among the Muslims of Britain. He published the results of his exhaustive investigation in his groundbreaking book *Al-Britannia: My Country*, a book to which policy makers would be well-advised to pay a great deal of attention.

In his introduction he says: “In 2016 I set out to try to make my own assessment of the Islamist threat, and the public and official responses to it... What I found was a community boiling with resentment at the way they are being treated, above all by the way they are collectively blamed for the proportionally tiny number of violent extremists among them. The mood in too many places I visited, from Birmingham and Bradford to Luton and London, is tinged by fear, paranoia, anger and confusion... I spent hundreds of hours talking to Muslims in shops, mosques, schools, community centres, on the street and in their homes, in towns and cities from Cardiff to Inverness, and the more I heard and saw, the more convinced I became that it is not just counterproductive but profoundly unfair to go on viewing them through the distorting prism of national security... The government wants British Muslims to integrate better into wider society, a sensible enough ambition, given how prevalent their culture

and religion have become. Its counter-terrorism policies, however, are in danger of producing the opposite effect, a new deep wedge between Muslims and the rest of us.” The reason the present policy is so counterproductive is precisely its tendency to engender alienation that Fergusson refers to.

What is produced by the Prevent agenda that the government is so determined to implement is a mood, particularly among the younger members of the Muslim community, which, far from encouraging integration, leads to further alienation and a feeling of separateness from the main body of British society, in other words to the very conditions that are the seed-bed of that resentment which, as we have seen, has always proved the breeding ground for the formation of potential terrorists. It creates a reservoir of discontent, a huge number of young people unhappy with the situation they are living in, unable to identify satisfactorily with the population at large, not really at home in the country they should be able to call their own. This makes it easy for the unscrupulous and manipulative Islamist indoctrinators of al-Qaida and ISIS and their likes to peddle their poisonous wares to vulnerable individuals at the bottom of this spreading swamp of simmering resentment.

To extend this metaphor a little, the last thing that is needed is to increase the size of this swamp, the right action would be to drain it. In other words if, by continuing the policies at present being propagated, the number of Muslims feeling marginalised and set upon continues to grow larger and larger, the catchment area for the terrorist recruiters gets correspondingly bigger and the tiny percentage of seducible candidates far easier to find. If, however, the Muslims of Britain are made to feel truly welcome here and really encouraged to integrate and identify themselves with the rest of the population, then the hunting ground of the twisted ideologues will greatly shrink in size, there will be much more social pressure within the Muslim community against their evil propaganda, and far fewer young Muslims will get caught up in their net. For this to

happen the government needs to completely change their approach to Islam and the Muslims. They must stop seeing Islam as a threat and viewing orthodox, mainstream Muslim opinions as a conveyor belt leading to violent extremism and see Islam for what it really is, a potential source of spiritual renewal and social benefit for the whole country.

The Muslims themselves will be completely open to such a change of direction and I am sure that their response will be overwhelmingly positive. As Fergusson also says in the introduction to his book: "Far from being secret enemies of the state, the Muslims I interviewed repeatedly insisted, unprompted, that not only was Britain a great country in which to live, but also that they felt and were proud to be British. Opinion polls consistently find the same thing. One much-cited poll, conducted for the think tank Demos in 2011, found that 83% of Muslims were 'proud to be a British citizen', which was actually 4% more than for the population as a whole... I was greeted everywhere with friendly curiosity, kindness and the traditional hospitality that I have come to associate with Islam abroad. I was constantly struck by the values that, for all the undoubted problems, still powerfully underpin British Muslim communities and how similar, ironically, these are to those of old-fashioned Toryism: the importance of family, respect for authority, probity, a strong sense of community, a belief in self-sacrifice and hard work." The question, then, is how to go about encouraging this process of integration and what can be done at an official level to ease the way to it.

What must not be done, and yet seems at the moment to be an integral element of government policy towards Islam and the Muslim community, is to try and dictate to the Muslims what their religion should be. There is an Islamic reform agenda being strongly advocated by government sources, backed by a few heterodox Muslim voices that certainly do not have the support of the vast majority of the Muslim community, which would have the Muslims radically alter some quite fundamental aspects of Islamic practice and behaviour.

As I have already said, traditional, orthodox Islamic practice and opinion, within the context of its establishment in Britain today, presents no threat whatsoever to the fabric of British society. It is certainly true that some of these opinions are very conservative and may appear out of kilter with current mores but it is also true that it is not only the Muslims who hold such views, and should not the much vaunted principle of freedom of speech and opinion apply to them, provided they remain within the law of the land? The main body of the Muslim community must be allowed to decide for itself the parameters of their religion and what the teachings of Islam really are, without any interference from outside influences. The teaching of Islam must remain firmly in Muslim hands.

Talking of teaching, education is certainly an arena in which greater integration of the Muslim community can be fostered and increased but, perhaps, not in the way some liberal educationalists might propose. It is often claimed by such people that separate religious education is divisive and prevents social cohesion but in fact the opposite is true. If a person has a sound grounding in their own religious tradition, it actually reinforces their sense of identity and gives them a strong basis for their social interaction with the wider community. Far from alienating them, it in fact makes it easier for them to relate to other people in a positive way. Problems of identity and insecurity, which are known to lead to anti-social, criminal and, in extreme cases, terrorist activity, tend, in the case of Muslims, to occur in young people who do not have a strong grounding in their own religious tradition and become confused about how they fit into the society in which they live. This does not happen with young Muslim men and women who are well taught and secure in their own religious identity.

Not one of the Muslims convicted in Britain on terrorism charges has been a properly educated Muslim. By that I mean that not one of them has had a thorough grounding in basic Islamic studies. The same can be said of the leaders they follow. For instance, Usama

b. Ladin was an engineer and az-Zawarihi is a medical doctor by training. A lot has been alleged against the traditional madrasa system, where Islamic studies are taught, and it has been accused of abetting terrorism, yet no graduate from a British dar al-'uloom, where traditional Islamic studies are undertaken, has yet to be accused of any terrorist activity. In fact it is true to say that most of those involved in these outrages have very little knowledge of Islam at all, often just bits and pieces picked up second-hand through the internet or from very one-sided extremist tracts. It is true that the after-school madrasas which take place in many mosques up and down the country have, in the past, left a lot to be desired in the way they convey Islamic learning to the young Muslims who attend them, but in recent years a great deal has been done to bring them up to date and make what they teach and the way it is taught far more relevant to the needs of the students who attend them. The point is that proper Islamic education in fact precludes terrorist activity and lack of it leaves an open door for the exploitation and grooming of young and vulnerable Muslims towards a path of militant extremism.

For this reason properly constituted Islamic schools in Britain should be encouraged, not discouraged, provided, of course, that they offer a thoroughly rounded education that grounds their pupils in the historical background of the country that is now their home and gives them all the tools they need for their future lives as British citizens. However, it is also clear that only a small minority of Muslim children in Britain will, in any case, be able to go to such schools and so it is absolutely crucial that the needs of the great majority, who go through the state school system, should also be properly catered for. The government should, therefore, ensure that there are a sufficient number of professionally trained Muslim teachers qualified to deliver proper instruction in the practice and teachings of Islam within the state school system and make the necessary funding available to enable this to happen. At the same

time “positive assimilation” practices, such as that of forcing Muslim boys and girls to sit together at the same desk, and other similar things that Muslim parents find objectionable, should be abandoned.

I know that the suggestion of religious instruction of this kind will raise hackles and implementing it will clearly make organisational demands on the schools concerned. But it is not really such an outlandish proposal. When I was at school here I only received instruction in our own Christian tradition and, indeed, that was the form that religious education took for all children of my generation. The present smorgasbord approach, whereby every religion is given equal weight and looked at in a very superficial way, leaves children extremely confused about which faith, if any, they should adopt. In the eighties I was on the SACRE of the Norfolk LEA and I was told in all seriousness that the best teacher of religious studies was an atheist because he could be completely impartial about all of the faiths discussed! And at about the same period I was employed for a time by one of the public schools to give Islamic instruction to the small group of Muslims there during the time that the other boys were doing religious studies, so I know it can be done. This does not mean that I don't think that children should not learn about other faiths, indeed in our multicultural society it is important that they do. That teaching should, however, be quite separate from their individual instruction in their own religious tradition.

Therefore, for the sake of the healthy development of the children involved, especially in the case of Muslim children where their faith usually plays a very important part in their life, it is vital that this aspect of education, particularly in the early years, should be taken care of and that parental choice be allowed to play a prescriptive part. And this should apply equally to every other religious tradition and, indeed, to those parents who would prefer their children to be instructed in humanism or no religion at all. All should be assured that their children will receive proper training in the religious tradition, or lack of it, within which they are being raised. This will

go a long way towards making the Muslim children of this country confident of their Islamic identity within the British context and enable them to take their place in wider society as active British citizens. It also may well be, at the same time, the single most important step that can be taken to encourage Muslim integration and minimise the likelihood of any future homegrown terrorism on the part of British Muslims.

Now it takes two to tango and it is clear that the desire for integration must be mutual, must be present in both the general population and the Muslims themselves, and it must be admitted that with the latter this is not always the case. For example, it is the stated aim of certain groups within the Muslim community in Britain to do all they can to preserve in every possible way their distinct and separate cultural identity. They are doing this in the name of protecting themselves from what they see as the dangerous influences of British society in order to safeguard their Islam and their identity as Muslims. In doing this they are equating Islam with their own particular brand or cultural expression of it and consequently making Islam exclusive and not giving it the inclusive character that has always been an essential element of it. But the truth is that cultures simply cannot be transplanted from one environment to another since so many aspects of them arise from the geographical location where they originate. So if the preservation of a particular cultural or sectarian identity is seen as an end in itself, or even as something desirable for its own sake, then it actually becomes an obstacle to the proper functioning of Islam in the new environment. This can take various forms.

One common one is that mosques, rather than being just places of worship, become ethnic, cultural, sectarian or linguistic enclaves, in which even Muslims who do not belong to the particular group concerned feel out of place. And the same can apply to whole areas of some of our towns and cities. This is in a way reflected architecturally. There is no specific architectural form a mosque should take and everywhere in the world mosques echo the

architectural idioms of the places where they are built. Too many purpose built mosques in Britain, however, look out of place, are self-conscious imitations of architectural conventions from other lands. This is brought into sharp focus by those mosques, of which there are now a growing number, that are designed to be in keeping with indigenous British architectural traditions and which really do fit in to the urban landscape surrounding them.

Connected to this can be particular ways of dressing, which some groups may insist on as a way of differentiating themselves from the rest of the community. It is natural and right that people should wear what they feel comfortable in and what is needed to fulfil their religious requirements but it becomes a destructive thing when specific clothing is consciously imposed as a kind of foreign uniform to set them apart from their fellow countrymen. In this context it is demonstrably the case that in no country where Islam has been established for any length of time is there any sign of cultural imposition from elsewhere; it is as if it had grown from the soil of the place where it is established. Following on from this, it is almost certain that Islam in the UK will gradually lose the differing cultural characteristics of the various immigrant ethnic groups that at present make up the majority of the Muslims here, and which do tend to set them apart from the population at large, and will develop a distinctive indigenous cultural identity derived from their long term residence in Britain.

The same can apply to language. Obviously when people come from another land, the language of their country of origin will inevitably be spoken among them for a considerable period after their arrival. However, if that linguistic difference is latched on to as a means of emphasising ethnic or cultural identity and consciously used by people to keep themselves separate from those around them then it definitely becomes a negative factor where greater integration is concerned. One thing that certainly drags out this linguistic factor is a continuing tendency for British Muslims to bring in

spouses from their countries of origin. This not only exacerbates the language problem just referred to but also protracts in a visceral way the connection of the family concerned with their country of origin because, even if the husband or wife is a second or third generation Briton, by doing this the family continues to retain a first generation link with what is then inevitably still seen as their homeland.

This practice perpetuates what might be called “back-homeism”, whereby that family as a whole will still refer to their country of origin as “back home”. It is obviously very difficult for people to become truly integrated in Britain, to make this their homeland, if they still retain that extremely close connection to another country. So the bringing in of spouses from abroad is something that should be discouraged and encouragement should be given, and incentives introduced, to make it more attractive for young Muslims to choose their marital partners from the local community. There should come a time – and it must be said that many Muslim families here have already reached this point – when home really is the British town or city where the family now live. It is not that the connection with the other country is lost, it is just that it becomes a memory rather than an immediate reality. It is a bit like Irish and Italian and other immigrant families in the U.S. They often retain a strong emotional link with the land their families originally came from but woe-betide anyone who suggests that they are anything but American.

So there are certainly steps that Muslims can and should take, and generally speaking are taking, to further the cause of their greater integration in the UK but there is a greater onus on the host community to do much more to make the British Muslim community feel more welcome here and, indeed, some of those separatist attitudes I have just been talking about are only given life to by the present climate of hostility towards Islam that Muslims in this country are subjected to on a daily basis. There is a purely pragmatic reason for making the Muslims truly at home here, which I have already referred to, but there is also a simple human

duty to do so, given that the great majority of British Muslims are only here because their parents or grandparents were invited to settle here by the government to take on essential jobs that no one else was willing or able to do at the time. And there is one particular thing that must be faced if the Muslim community here is ever going to feel really accepted in Britain and successfully integrate into British society.

It is a commonplace that Islam is less of a religion, in the normally accepted definition of that word, and more a complete way of life. In other words it extends beyond just acts of worship and enters in an integral way into areas of life that are usually considered part of the secular realm, such as marriage, divorce, inheritance and other similar matters. It is unreasonable to expect the Muslim community to integrate properly into the British body politic if the condition for doing that is that they have to abandon several integral aspects of Islam. In the same way it is, of course, equally unreasonable for Muslims to expect any radical changes to be made in the legal regulations governing these matters in order to satisfy their religious requirements. However, the truth is that it is actually quite possible for both sides to be accommodated: for Muslim needs concerning these matters to be met within the accepted parameters of the British legal system. The way it would be possible to do this is set out clearly in a lecture delivered by Dr Rowan Williams at the Royal Courts of Justice in February 2008 entitled Civil and Religious law in England: a religious perspective.

The hysterical media reaction to this speech was not only totally unwarranted from the point of view of its content but also played a significant role in worsening relations with the Muslim community and giving ammunition to right wing populists to aid them in their ongoing hostile campaign against the Muslim presence in Britain. The then Archbishop of Canterbury's considered speech, in reality a rather dense discussion of the relation between theology and the law, became an "OUTBURST" and a "VICTORY FOR TERRORISM"

and a treatise on the “necessity for limb removal and stoning and beheading” which was tied in with the headline “ARCHBISHOP SAYS UK MUST ACCEPT ISLAMIC SHARIA LAW”. Dr Williams had indeed advocated adopting certain aspects of Sharia law but specifically excluded punishments such as these. In any case, even from the most strictly orthodox Muslim point of view, these kinds of punishment are completely inapplicable in the context of 21st century Britain. And in even the most classical, medieval books of Islamic law less than two percent of the text is devoted to these deterrent punishments; and, in any case, the threshold of evidence required before such penalties can be prescribed is so high that they were, in point of fact, rarely administered.

A whole furore has grown up around the word shari’a. The word is virtually always mentioned in a negative context and raised by the media as a kind of frightening bogeyman to scare the general populace and raise the spectre of Islamic domination. Corroborating this, a report about the way Islam is covered in the media from the Cardiff School of Journalism says: “We found journalists’ discussion of Sharia law in Britain regularly and consistently focused on violence, barbarism, and irrationality.” They found that Sharia law was almost always associated with stoning, limb removal and beheading and that only four percent of the coverage did not carry negative connotations. This is a disgraceful portrayal of one of mankind’s greatest legal systems, one that ensured the highest standard of social justice for a huge portion of the world’s population for well over a millennium. The idea that what is universally recognized to have been one of the greatest civilizations the world has known could have grown up under a legal system that was anything other than just, enlightened and compassionate is unthinkable.

Far from what the scaremongers would have you believe, ninety-nine percent of the Shari’a is, in fact, concerned with defining the acts of worship that punctuate the life of every Muslim, with matters of marriage and inheritance, and the regulation of business

transactions. It is particularly ironic that this hysterical antipathy against the Shari'a should be stirred up in a country, which actually owes a great deal to it. We are rightly very proud of our unique code of British Common Law. It distinguishes our legal system from other western systems of law and was largely drawn up in the 12th Century during the reign of Henry II. It resulted in revolutionary changes in the English legal system, chief among which were the action of debt, the assize of novel disseisin – this defined in a new way the nature of ownership under English law – and trial by jury. What is less well known is that these revolutionary innovations, which have been so integral to our development as a nation, were directly imported, via Sicily, from the Islamic Shari'a. And yes, it is owing to the Shari'a that we have our famous jury system. When you add the fact that the Inns of Court, the very heart of the British legal system, were also derived from an Islamic model, it should be clear to everyone that the Shari'a is not at all what it has been made out to be.

So let's look at what Dr Williams actually was advocating in his lecture. He himself says in it: "My aim is only to tease out some of the broader issues around the rights of religious groups within a secular state, with a few thoughts about what might be entailed in crafting a just and constructive relationship between Islamic law and the statutory law of the United Kingdom." One thing implicit in what he says, indeed it is integral to the reason for him saying it, is an acceptance of the permanence of the Muslim presence in Britain. I say this because there is a general failure to properly understand this – not helped by the way Islam is treated in the media and by the government policy initiatives referred to earlier – and a persistent public perception of Islam as an intruder from elsewhere, that it does not really belong in these islands, and that it might be better if it went back to where it came from. The fact is that Islam is, and has been for quite some time now, an integral and inextricable part of the social and spiritual fabric of these islands and Dr Williams' understanding of this reality clearly underlies the importance he gives to this matter.

He starts by highlighting the problem: “The issues that arise around what level of public or legal recognition, if any, might be allowed to the legal provisions of a religious group are not peculiar to Islam...” and he continues: “Even when some of the more dramatic fears are set aside, there remains a great deal of uncertainty about what degree of accommodation the law of the land can and should give to minority communities with their own strongly entrenched legal and moral codes. As such, this is not only an issue about Islam but about other faith groups, including Orthodox Judaism; and indeed it spills over into some of the questions which have surfaced sharply in the last twelve months about the right of religious believers in general to opt out of certain legal provisions – as in the problems around Roman Catholic adoption agencies which emerged in relation to the Sexual Orientation Regulations last spring.”

Nevertheless, despite the problems involved, there is a clear need within the context of “the freedom to exercise religion or belief in worship, teaching, practice and observance”, which is what is required of us under human rights legislation, to accommodate the legitimate requirements of different religious groups within the framework of the British legal system and this is not always met. Dr Williams speaks of “...legal rulings which have disregarded the account offered by religious believers of the motives for their own decisions, on the grounds that the court alone is competent to assess the coherence or even sincerity of their claims.” He says, quoting Bradney, that the courts are open “to the accusation of undermining the principle of liberal pluralism by denying someone the right to speak in their own voice.” And he speaks of “the need for better definition of the kind of protection for religious conscience that the law intends.”

A little later in his lecture he makes the specific point, which is extremely relevant in the context of this discussion, that “one of the most frequently noted problems in the law in this area is the reluctance of a dominant rights-based philosophy to acknowledge the

liberty of conscientious opting-out from collaboration in procedures or practices that are in tension with the demands of particular religious groups: the assumption, in rather misleading shorthand, that if a right or liberty is granted there is a corresponding duty upon every individual to ‘activate’ this whenever called upon.” To this he adds the vital proviso that “the refusal of a religious believer to act upon the legal definition of a right is not, given the plural character of society, a denial to anyone inside or outside the community of access to that right. The point has been granted in respect of medical professionals who may be asked to perform or co-operate in performing abortions – a perfectly reasonable example of the law doing what I defined earlier as its job, securing space for those aspects of human motivation and that cannot be finally determined by any corporate or social system. It is difficult to see quite why the principle cannot be extended in other areas.” In other words: why should the right to opt-out afforded to medical practitioners not also be afforded to religious practitioners in similar circumstances, since the legal precedent for doing this already exists?

Given that, in the case of Islam and Judaism which both have their own long-standing legal systems, there will inevitably be parallel or supplementary jurisdictions involved, Dr Williams is careful to define their limits. He says that: “...no ‘supplementary’ jurisdiction could have the power to deny access to the rights granted to other citizens or to punish its members for claiming those rights. This is in effect to mirror what a minority might themselves be requesting – that the situation should not arise where membership of one group restricted the freedom to live also as a member of an overlapping group, that (in this case) citizenship in a secular society should not necessitate the abandoning of religious discipline, any more than religious discipline should deprive one of access to liberties secured by the law of the land.” And then a little later: “So the objection to an increased legal recognition of communal religious identities can be met if we are prepared to think about the basic ground rules

that might organise the relationship between jurisdictions, making sure that we do not collude with unexamined systems that have an oppressive effect or allow shared public liberties to be decisively taken away by a supplementary jurisdiction.”

However, Dr Williams warns that there are likely to be adverse consequences if the narrow rights-based view of the law that excludes the legal needs of religious communities is allowed to continue unchecked. He states, “It is not enough to say that citizenship as an abstract form of equal access and equal accountability is either the basis or the entirety of social identity and personal motivation.” That creates a situation in which “...certain kinds of affiliation are marginalised or privatised to the extent that what is produced is a ghettoised pattern of social life, in which particular sorts of interest and of reasoning are tolerated as private matters but never granted legitimacy in public as part of a continuing debate about shared goods and priorities. This means that we have to think a little harder about the role and rule of law in a plural society of overlapping identities.” And he goes on to say about religion, custom and habit, “The role of secular law is not the dissolution of these things in the name of universalism but the monitoring of such affiliations to prevent the creation of mutually isolated communities in which human liberties are seen in incompatible ways and individual persons are subjected to restraints or injustices for which there is no public redress.”

I do not hold any particular brief, to continue in this legal vein, for Dr Williams but the clarity of his intellect is generally acknowledged and so his insight into this matter, coming as it does from a position of genuine authority, should not be underrated and should certainly not be lightly dismissed. He clearly sees that for our irrevocably pluralistic society to remain healthy steps need to be taken to ensure in a structural way that the legitimate legal demands of minority religious groups, with some emphasis on those of the Muslim community, are met by incorporating them within the British legal system, on the condition that they do not jeopardise the

rights of any other citizen. This has already begun to happen with, for instance, the Law Society providing guidance to solicitors on the drawing up of “Shari’a compliant” wills and the Divorce (Religious Marriages) Act making provision for marriages that were carried out in accordance with “the usages of the Jews, or any other prescribed religious usages.” But further steps need to be taken for the Muslims to really feel that their judicial requirements are genuinely being met. And this is not without a clear precedent.

Over the colonial period the British authorities responsible for governing Muslim populations developed a legal system known as Anglo-Mohammedan Law. This was first drawn up in India but was then extended to every territory in Asia and Africa where Muslims came under British control. I am not suggesting that there is any equivalence between the situation in 21st century Britain and that which pertained in 19th and 20th century British colonies but what is clearly demonstrated by the legal provisions made to deal with them, in all of which English Common Law was the dominant judicial code, is that Islamic law and the British legal system are definitely not mutually exclusive and that certain aspects of Islamic law can be enacted without that threatening overall British judicial authority. In this context it might be interesting for government lawyers to examine the provisions made during the colonial period in Sri Lanka and Singapore, where Muslims were very much in the minority. It may well be that some parallels might be drawn from what was done then and there for the situation we are in here and now.

I realise that I have gone on about this matter at considerable length and the reason for that is that its importance for Muslims cannot be overstated. Although the three million Muslims in this country are only a little more than 5% of the population in overall terms, recent statistics show that they form a far larger percentage of the nation’s practising religious believers and so their religious requirements are correspondingly and proportionally greater than those of many of

their fellow citizens. What this means is that religious precepts and rulings loom far larger, play a far more important part, in the lives of most Muslims than they do in the lives of most of their fellow countrymen. Recent research has shown that the one thing that all those who participate in terrorist activity have in common, no matter what their ideological justification may be, is a sense of being excluded and everything I have said is about what can be done to prevent vulnerable Muslims from being drawn into terrorism. One way that a great many Muslims do feel that they are being excluded from mainstream British life at the moment is that no room is made under the law for a number of things that are central to their lives. What a tremendous boost it would give to their sense of inclusion, to the cause of genuine integration, if those things were actually to be incorporated within the legal system under which they are governed. And, as has just been made clear, that goal can in fact be achieved without any detrimental effect to the legal rights of any of their fellow citizens.

Another way Muslims are continually made to feel set apart from the general populace is because of certain positions they are purported to hold that are at odds with “the British way of life”. One of these is the supposed “forced segregation” between men and women that Muslims are accused of imposing in public places. I have attended scores of public meetings organised by Muslims in many different types of public venues all over the country and have never been “forced” to sit anywhere. It is absolutely true that, when Muslims gather in public, men and women tend to separate by gender, women sitting with women and men with men, usually, in the familiar setting of an audience facing a stage, with men on one side of the auditorium and the women on the other. But this happens quite naturally by free choice and is because Muslims feel more comfortable with this arrangement. In the case that, as has often happened, there were also non-muslim men and women present who have wanted to sit next to one another, they have done so and

I have never witnessed a single occasion in forty years where they were prevented from doing that. The whole matter is simply a non-issue and why it has been turned into such a contentious problem is puzzling to say the least. More worrying, as I mentioned earlier, is the real “forced integration” going on in a number of schools, where boys and girls are actually being coerced into sitting next to each other in class when they do not want to.

Another of these so-called reactionary Muslim attitudes, brought up endlessly in the media and elsewhere, is the reputed violent hostility of Islam towards the gay community and it is, perhaps, worth taking this opportunity to look in a little detail at the Islamic position on homosexuality in order to lay this particular bugbear and others like it to rest. If popularly disseminated anti-muslim propaganda were to be believed, every Muslim would, if they could, throw every gay person they came across off the nearest high building. That is an absolute travesty of the true Islamic position on this matter. It must first of all be stated unequivocally that sex between people of the same gender is forbidden to Muslims and that anal intercourse is, under certain circumstances, a punishable criminal offence. Having said that, it should be added that the same applies to all sexual intercourse outside of marriage, even when the people concerned are of the opposite sex, and that Islam is by no means the only religion to propose these limits on human sexual activity.

To counterbalance this, the existence of sexual attraction between members of the same sex has been an accepted phenomenon in the Muslim community since the earliest days of Islam and is addressed in many classical Islamic texts, as has the fact that people will act on it. The respected American Muslim academic, Dr Jonathan Brown, says in a recent answer he gave to a question about the attitude of Islam to gay marriage: “The focus on actions in the Shariah means that desires or inclinations have no legal substance. The Shariah doesn’t have a position on homosexual desire. Indeed, it can be

quite normal. Like ancient Athenians, classical Muslim scholars and littérateurs regularly marvelled over the beauty of young boys. Heirs to the Greeks, Muslim scholars found it expectable that men would be attracted to young boys or beautiful males...”

For homosexuality to become a punishable offence in Islam the actual act of anal penetration must be physically witnessed by at least four trustworthy witnesses. In other words it has, to all intents and purposes, to be a public act before any legal action can be involved and would, therefore, also, even under British law, constitute the punishable criminal offence of gross indecency. The strict laws of privacy in Islam that prevent official intrusion into private spaces have, as a consequence, resulted throughout the history of Islam in known homosexual activity being passively tolerated by authorities in every part of the Muslim world. This in no way mitigates its forbidden nature, it merely means that it was, in all but the most flagrant cases, a matter of individual conscience, whereby the people concerned would be left to answer to their Lord for transgressing the limits He has prescribed. It must also be remembered, in the present context, that the Islamic prohibition of gay sex in any case applies to Muslims alone and has no bearing whatsoever on what non-muslims do. There is, therefore, no danger at all of Muslims interfering with the sexual rights of non-muslims.

In other words, the Muslim attitude to homosexuality is almost exactly the same as that of Orthodox Judaism and many Christian denominations and, indeed, of many other people of no particular religious faith, and, if it has to be categorised, would be best labelled as “social conservatism” rather than extremism of any kind. There is no question of violent hostility; simply one of conscientious objection. Surely we have not reached the point when any divergence from the present, comparatively recently introduced, liberal orthodoxy is to be decried as an intolerable heresy. As Dr Williams said, it cannot be that the fact that a right is granted to one group of citizens means that every individual in our society has to “activate” that right

whenever called upon to do so. There must be room in our society for differences on moral issues, even if those differences contravene the current climate of opinion. And this applies to almost all the instances where the Muslim community is accused of being un-British in its attitudes. Indeed a number of those attitudes would have been considered quintessentially British as little as fifty years ago and many people of that time would have viewed many of the social changes of this time with considerable repugnance. On this basis the worst the Muslim community can be accused of is being a bit old-fashioned in its views.

The upshot of all this is that if the government truly wants to counteract the threat of what has become known as “Islamic terrorism”, a complete change of strategy is required, a reversal of the existing government policies. The present policies, whatever their intention may be, do little but exacerbate a sense of “otherness” where Islam and the Muslims of Britain are concerned, both in the eyes of the general population and of the Muslims themselves. As part of her research for her recent report on the British Muslim Community, The Casey Review, Dame Louise Casey held a meeting in Bradford, which I attended. Shortly after the meeting I received an email from her in which she said, “Your words ‘Islam is a British religion’ have been resonating with me throughout today.” It is this that really needs to be taken on board by both the government and the British public at large. Like it or not, Islam has become firmly rooted in this land and is now a permanent, integral feature of the British landscape. The Muslims of Britain are in every sense British and have every right to be considered in exactly the same light as every other British citizen. Rather than fostering, or at the very least bolstering, by their rhetoric and policy statements the idea that Islam and the Muslims are some kind of foreign body that has no right to be here, what the government should be doing is affirming Islam for the positive values it in reality represents and the valuable contribution it has been making for some time now to the country we all live in.

Even quite perfunctory, objective historical research will reveal the overwhelmingly salutary effect that Islam has had everywhere it has taken root. Its insistence on spiritual integrity, social justice and economic probity has engendered great flowerings of human civilisation in many parts of the world. Its potential to do the same here and help to reinvigorate the amorphous, post-colonial, identity-seeking, multi-ethnic nation that is the reality of Britain in this early part of the 21st century is only just beginning to be felt. Islam is a force for good in the UK. It should be welcomed as such. The stigmatisation and alienation of British Muslims abetted by present government policy must cease. It is vital that British Muslims are made to feel at home here in their homeland so that the alienation and sense of not properly belonging, so integral, as we have seen, to the mindset of the potential terrorist, no longer have any bearing at all on their lives and so that the beneficial potential of Islam is able to find, at their hands, true expression in the country of their birth. Given that this paper in a way touches on the same theme, I think it would be appropriate to end it with the words used by George Orwell to conclude his masterful 1940 essay on England and Englishness, *The Lion and the Unicorn: England Your England*. He says that our country is an "...animal stretching into the future and the past, and like all living things, having the power to change out of recognition and yet remain the same." How appropriate that metaphor is for 21st century Britain.



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