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By Post, by Fax and E-mail

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Dear Mr Smith,

**Programme on Islam in England
Scheduled for Dispatches, Channel 4, Monday 15th January 2007**

I am writing in response to your letter dated the 28th December 2006 which appears to have been written just when you knew we would be celebrating the 'Id al-Adha, thereby giving us less time in which to respond to what in any case appears to be a programme whose content has already been decided.

Naturally I am surprised that you appear to have already more or less decided what words you are going to put into my mouth and that you did not even have the courtesy to request an interview with me so that my viewpoint could be included in your programme. In my humble opinion the mark of balanced investigative journalism is to do just this, to talk to everyone who is going to feature in an article or documentary, even if this means that some preconceived notions may prove to be unsustainable before they are aired.

If, which I hope is not the case, this is going to be just another attack on Islam and Muslims, which is very much in vogue nowadays, then I must remind you that if I or any member of my staff or anyone who worships at the Green Lane Mosque or the Mosque itself are subjected to any form of physical attack as a result of your programme then you, HardCash Productions Ltd and Channel 4 will all be liable to prosecution for incitement to commit a criminal act.

If, which I hope is the case, this is going to be a balanced documentary in which everyone involved has had a chance to respond on film to any serious allegations which you may feel it is necessary to make, then by way of preliminary advance notice my response to your letter is as follows:

The sources of the Muslims' teaching are the Qur'an, which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and his Sunnah, his example, much of which is recorded in authenticated Hadith, as well as being kept alive by direct transmission from generation to generation. He was descended from Isma'il (Ishmael), the son of Ibrahim (Abraham) – in contrast to 'Isa (Jesus) and Musa (Moses), peace be on them, who were both descended from Ishaq (Isaac), also the son of Ibrahim (Abraham). They are all members of the same blessed family, peace be on them.

The Qur'an states that it both confirms and abrogates the earlier revelations of the Torah (the Pentateuch) and the Injil (the Gospel) which were revealed to Moses and Jesus respectively and which no longer exist in their original revealed form. Muslims are commanded in the Qur'an and the Hadith to treat practising Jews and Christians with respect, but also not to imitate them as regards changing the original teaching of their Prophet.

The teachings of these three Messengers were primarily concerned with showing their followers how to worship God – not the message and not the messenger – as well as how to lead a balanced life. I am sure that it came as no surprise to your undercover journalist to discover that this was the subject matter of most of the talks which he or she attended. I am sure that there was sufficient material in the talks to which he or she

listened to outline the basics of the five pillars of Islam, all of which are concerned with worshipping Allah, the Creator of the Universe and what it contains, including us.

During the last year we invited approximately 100 scholars from around the world and from many different backgrounds to speak at our Mosque, 20 of whom spoke during the period 19th May to 29th September 2006 – and most of whom were neither born nor educated in Saudi Arabia. You appear to be finding fault with a few sentences from a few of the speakers, quoted as far as I can see (although you say I am not allowed to see, just yet, perhaps just in case I put the record straight) entirely out of context, in order to make a point which you want to present as a complete picture.

Needless to say, I did not know exactly what each speaker would say beforehand, especially the speaker who spoke in Derby not Birmingham, and needless to say, although I recognise their freedom to speak, I do not necessarily agree with everything they may have said. I am sure you will recognise that it is virtually impossible for anyone, including my and your good self, to be aware of all the material which is available on the internet and in retail outlets, let alone to act as an informal censor into the bargain.

As Muslims, we are free to disagree with anyone except the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, who has advised us to speak good or remain silent.

I am well aware that it is all too easy to misrepresent a person's words and character by quoting a sentence or two out of context in order to paint a particular picture – and accordingly I request you on behalf of all of the speakers to whom you will be referring in your documentary to contact each one of them (not just one or two of them) and to ask them exactly what they meant by what they said and the context within which it was said.

If your documentary is going to be a balanced one, I suggest further that you should film their response to your allegations, if they agree to this, so that you then have a programme in which you have given your accused a fair trial – which, I believe, is a characteristic of being both civil and civilised. I believe in a right to reply as part of a programme, rather than in response to it, especially since any response written after the event will in all probability not receive the same coverage and attention as the programme itself.

I am surprised and disturbed that you have not requested an interview either with me or with any of our Imams or invited speakers to comprise part of the content of your documentary. I am aware that many of our civil liberties in America and Europe are being eroded and dismantled in the name of “the protection of freedom and security”, but I think you should have honoured freedom of speech and fair comment by at least speaking to the people you will be attacking in your documentary to let them have their say – unless of course you are engaged in a witch hunt which relies on the pre-emptive strike in order to have maximum impact, even if the result will be unfortunate collateral damage.

Maulana Abdul Hadi went on the pilgrimage this year. As far as your taking exception to his describing a two-day conference as beautiful, perhaps this is because his assessment was sensibly based on the main theme of the conference which was preparing for the Day of Judgement, which is described very clearly in the Qur'an and the Hadith, rather than simply on a couple of sentences from a couple of speakers.

If your criticisms and review are constructive and fair as you claim in your letter, then God willing we will learn from them, because we are only human and there is always room for improvement.

Trial by media is very popular nowadays, especially of Muslims, in the absence of any effective legal remedy to the offence of incitement to religious hatred. But you should nevertheless remember that on the Last Day all of us will have to answer to Allah for our intentions and actions, so perhaps you should be asking yourself right now just exactly what your intentions are and whether or not the actions which result from them are steering you towards the Garden or the Fire. This is something between you and your Creator.

Perhaps the prayer and fasting and acts of charity of those whom you attack will be more pleasing to Allah than a programme's critical opinions based on speculation and a clever manipulation of facts and images.

If your research has been thorough, then I am sure you will be fully aware of all the interfaith initiatives, with Jews and Christians especially, in which the Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith are involved along with many other Jewish, Christian and Muslim organisations. It would be a great pity if you were seek to undermine these initiatives because you had not done your homework properly. Markazi Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith is committed to promoting interfaith dialog and political harmony in our society. One of our senior members is an executive member of Birmingham Council of Faiths for the last twenty years.

None of us are the same, whatever our political or religious affiliations may be, but on the whole in my experience most groups are characterised by an acceptable degree of moderation and toleration of each other. Perhaps you should ask yourself if your programme is designed to foster or destroy such relations – which are essential in multi-cultural, multi-faith society.

As regards the use of the term kafir (plural: kufar, kafirun) this is a neutral term which is used to describe someone who rejects Allah and His Messenger, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. It means someone who covers up the truth. In contrast the term mumin (plural: muminun) is used to describe someone who accepts Allah and His Messenger. It means someone who accepts the truth. They are opposites and for those who understand creation, both the kafirun and the muminun are essential elements of the creation, as are all the opposites. There is no night without day, no summer without winter.

Like all opposites, they are sometimes critical of each other and each other's actions – and this is why words of criticism in particular have to be viewed in context:

When, for example, someone speaks ill of “the Jews”, he may be thinking of those members of the IDF who use Palestinian children and British journalists for target practice, whereas he may be on very good terms with the local rabbi. When, for example, someone speaks ill of “the Christians”, he may be thinking of the Srebrenica massacre, whereas his children are best friends with his Christian neighbours' children. When, for example, someone speaks ill of “the Muslims”, he may be thinking of an idiot who has just blown himself up along with innocent bystanders – thereby consigning himself to the Fire in the next world – whereas he may be on very good terms with the Muslim who runs his local corner shop. Only fools tar everyone in a particular group with the same brush. Only fools look for the worst in someone and then describe everyone as if they were all the same as that bad example.

As far as your specific criticism of the Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith is concerned, namely that we are influenced by and teach an extreme version of Islam, we reject that assertion. Islam is the middle way. Guidance is from Allah through our guide, the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, who said, “Moderation is the best way”.

The two ways in which a person can deviate from prophetic guidance is by interpreting it too harshly or too loosely. Sincere Muslims always try to find the middle way that lies between these two extremes.

Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab was an 18th century reformer who sought to restore that middle way where it had been ignored or abandoned by the people of his time. He called on them to follow the Qur'an and the Sunnah, just as all sincere Muslim teachers and leaders do, whatever group they belong to. Many views and excesses are attributed to him that were not his – and which if anything characterise those who have abandoned the middle way.

In your letter to us you claimed that we had last summer planned an Islamic Studies course where ‘top students’ from our mosque ‘were to be offered scholarships to study Wahabism at Medina University’. This is a revealing allegation and seems to suggest that you are pursuing an agenda to try and divide British Muslims along sectarian lines. In fact, there is no such ‘Wahabism’ course taught at Medina University. Students go to Medina University from all across the Muslim world to be taught about Islam. They teach Islam which is tolerant of cultural practices which do not contradict it. Since different cultures have different characteristics, it sometimes appears that there are different forms of Islam, but the cultural practice should never be mistaken

for Islam itself. For example, practising Muslim women in Saudi Arabia dress differently to practising Muslim women in Malaysia. Both forms of dress are within the parameters of the Shari'a.

As regards your scatter-gun generalisations, I would like to draw your attention to the following points, on behalf of all Muslims, not only the members of the Jami'at Ahl-e-Hadith who are all sincere and peace-loving Muslims:

1. As with orthodox Jews and orthodox Christians, we believe that the people of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed and that their punishment was not due to their sexual orientation, but their PRACTICE of unnatural sexual acts. You can have a particular unnatural sexual orientation, but as long as you do not give in to such impulses, you are not deemed to be sinning. For this reason, as in the orthodox Jewish and Christian communities, the sexual practices of gays and lesbians are not encouraged within the Muslim community because we believe they are forbidden by God. We believe men and women were created as partners for each other. We believe in a recognised form of marriage. We also nevertheless recognise that everyone is free to live as they wish.

2. As regards relations between men and women, the teachings of Islam both honour and protect women, whilst recognising that the husband is the head of the family. Orthodox Jews and orthodox Christians do the same. It is a matter of balance between complementary opposites, not tyranny.

It is true that you can find examples of ill-treatment of women by men and of men by women within every group of people, but in my experience this is the exception, not the norm – otherwise we would all be living in single sex refuges – that is, if the human race had not already died out.

If the teachings of Islam promote oppression of women as you appear to maintain, how do you explain the fact that so many women in Europe and America are willingly and voluntarily embracing Islam, in spite of all the false accusations and stereotypes being promulgated by the non-Muslim media? Perhaps they find there is protection and peace in dressing modestly and worshipping their Creator which can not be found in accepting consumer commodity status.

3. As regards corporal punishment, the teachings of Islam permit a light smack as a mark of disapproval, but never the violent physical abuse of either children or marriage partner. Domestic violence does occur, right across the board, in every social grouping, but it is the mark of an ignorant person, not of someone who sincerely follows divine guidance.

The Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, whom all sincere Muslims strive to emulate, never hit any woman, child or servant.

4. As regards amputations, whippings, and crucifixions, how many one-handed Muslims have you encountered, how many lacerated backs have you documented being treated in any hospital, how many crucifixions have you seen – anywhere in the world? I suspect very few, if any. Contrast this with the atrocities and casualties recorded, for example, by the award-winning journalist Robert Fisk on a regular basis, as he catalogues only some of the results of the indiscriminate experimentation with modern technological weaponry in Iraq and Afghanistan which so frequently claims Muslim civilians as its victims.

5. Some of the *hadd* (fixed punishments) punishments in Islam work as an effective deterrent, even for those who do not fear Allah and the Last Day.

Islamic punishments are for Islamic States and where Islamic, moral and cultural systems are in place. Therefore they do not apply in any non-Muslim countries.

5. As regards political and religious aspirations, almost everyone would like to see others also belonging to their particular group. However this does not mean that they expect this to happen or try to make it happen in an unlawful manner. Allah says in the Qur'an that He has made up mankind of different peoples so that they can meet each other. He also says that if He had wanted, He could have made us all the same.

It looks as if you will be making as big a meal as possible in your programme of a few theoretical statements about hypothetical jihads and hypothetical Islamic states, while keeping silent about the hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians, predominantly Muslims, who have been slaughtered (not in theory but in actuality) in recent years in the Middle East, usually in the name of “liberation from oppression” and “establishing a democratic state” and never at the express invitation or request of this silenced (by death) majority.

In my experience, the greatest jihad faced by British Muslims today is their having to put up with the gross misrepresentations of Islam and Muslims by the media with patience and restraint.

As citizens and residents of the United Kingdom, we accept its laws, while seeking to have them improved by legitimate means, especially if we are treated unequally or where our European Convention on Human Rights Article 9 rights (especially as incorporated into English domestic law by the Human Rights Act 1998) still have not been secured by secondary legislation so as to provide legal remedies and compensation in circumstances where these rights are violated, whether by you or by anyone else.

We would be very happy to see a democratic majority of people embracing Islam and enjoying its fruits, in both worlds, but as Allah says in the Qur’an, you cannot make anyone accept Islam, even the ones you love, because it is Allah Who expands the heart to Islam.

The history of Islam is replete with examples of tolerance to members of other faiths that are unparalleled in human history. For hundreds of years the Muslims played host to Unitarian Jews and Christians fleeing the pogroms of Trinitarian Christian Europe. To this day there are large communities of Christians living throughout the Arab world. Some have lived under Muslim rule for well over a thousand years. If, as you appear to wish to argue, Muslims have such great hatred for non-Muslims, these communities would have ceased to exist long ago.

In contrast, this history of tolerance has not always been reciprocated by other faiths, for example, during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the era of European colonialism – and more recently in the Balkans and further east.

Returning to the present, I would like to emphasise that all the members of Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith are committed to following the way of Islam in a balanced and peaceful manner and to share its blessings with whoever would like to experience them – and without forcing Islam on anyone. We have no desire or intention to seize power or to discriminate against others. We accept the rule of law and we treat our non-Muslim neighbours with respect.

Our main objective is to serve the community at large, we endeavour to help and assist vulnerable people in prisons, hospitals and the poor. We have had several programs with liaison with the local police authority and other governmental bodies, in curbing drugs and this also involves other crimes such as theft and anti-social behaviour. We have programs for women, we run a youth club and we organise regular seminars to discuss health issues.

We are a community based organisation, striving to serve the community in the best way we can. Thank you.

Yours sincerely,

Shouaib Ahmed

Secretary General

Markazi Jamiat Ahl-e-Hadith UK