

‘Beyond tolerance, let’s cement friendships for the common good’

Extracts from a speech delivered by MCB Secretary General Iqbal Sacranie on 20th April 2004, at the East London Mosque & London Muslim Centre

One day conference 'Religious Tolerance in Britain' organised by the Community Cohesion Pathfinder Project

Firstly, the Muslim Ummah is in itself a multi-ethnic community. It draws believers from almost every continent of the world. This brings with it a wealth of different languages, cultures and backgrounds. Indeed as the Prophet (peace be on him) said:

All mankind is from Adam and Eve, an Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action

So tolerance of internal differences is a practical necessity for us.

The second reason as to why it’s vital for Muslims to practice tolerance is demonstrated by our presence here today. So many Muslims increasingly have direct experience of living amongst other faith groups. This means that in our daily lives, from the mundane to the momentous, we interact with others who share a different set of beliefs to us. We are bound together in a shared community in Britain. To make this diversity work tolerance represents the minimum criteria for success. We have done it before. Until its demise in the 1920s the Ottoman Chaliphate stood out as a marvelous example of tolerance and diversity: where Muslims, Jews, Christians and others lived successfully side-by-side – often in the face of persecution and intolerance of minority groups in the rest of Europe. Tolerance is therefore an Islamic concept.

All faith groups have an interest in promoting tolerance and diversity. In the face of constant and misplaced charges that religion is the cause of conflicts around the world, it is our duty to prove this is not the case. What better way to demonstrate this than through our everyday actions?

So we agree tolerance is important. But how do we promote it? Our main challenge is to convey this message to our communities at the grass-roots. We need to encourage local initiatives that bring together different faith groups in the spirit of dialogue and co-operation. National organisations like the MCB have an important role in providing leadership, but without the active involvement of local communities this potential remains unfulfilled. We need to look at what practical help and support we can collectively provide to encourage these initiatives. Many are already underway – and have been underway for a long time. We need to highlight such good practice examples so others may learn and be inspired by them.

Leaders of faith communities have an important role in provide the right type of leadership. It requires us to exercise judgement and wisdom. We need also to avoid giving into temptation. No matter how strong our urges to lapse into age-old myths and stereotypes about each other in troubled times. True leadership sets a good example – not just to one's own community – but to the whole community.

Finally, it is worth reminding ourselves that tolerance is merely the beginning. It is a pre-requisite of a multi-faith Britain. But to build a *successful* multi-faith Britain we need to set our sights much higher. We need to be more pro-active. We need to celebrate as well as tolerate. This means actively working with one another on issues of mutual concern. It means going the extra mile in order to cement our friendship and co-operation. Let's look to what is in the common good.

ENDS [check against delivery]