



Blackfriars Hall

Las Casas Institute: **Insights** Series

In Defence of Shared Values: The Muslim Council of Britain's Perspective

Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari

Secretary General Muslim Council of Britain

Blackfriars Hall is Permanent Private Hall of Oxford University and one the the University's Forty-five Halls and Colleges



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Foreword:

At the end of March 2009 we were delighted to welcome Dr Muhammad Abdul Bari to give a seminar at Blackfriars Hall's Las Casas Institute. His lecture, published here, was important in its own right but also a notable contribution to our emerging work on institutions, inter-religious dialogue and the nature of "secularism" in the European arena.

People of faith most often focus on their "theologies" of engagement in the public square. Arguably this has meant that they have not paid as much attention to the development of strategies of dialogue – supported by new institutions – that have been evolving on the part of EU states. France, for example, is the most self consciously secular European country and yet it has done more than any other EU member state to devise official channels by which to consult "acceptable" religious voices.¹ In Ireland the government has adopted a new (and separate) "structured dialogue" with faith communities despite long standing arrangements for "social partnership" that allow private, public and third sector bodies to collaborate in social and economic policy formulation.²

In the UK we have been called a "half way" house between the religiosity of Poland and the USA, and the secular culture of France.³ And yet citizens may still not be aware that the Secretary of State for Communities and Local government is the "lead" minister on religion/faiths across departments of state. It may not consequently occur to citizens of faith that utterances from this Department represent more than the personal opinions of a Minister who happened to be frustrated (or inspired) with the faith communities at any other department. In turn it may not occur to the Minister how often s/he is wandering into the realms of religious governance or theory and practice of law. And, as I have argued elsewhere, the evidence base to support such utterances is extremely weak within the government which leaves such decision-makers crucially exposed.⁴

Nowhere does this potential for tension become more clear than in the thorny matter of who should "speak" for the faith communities: At the old Department of Trade and Industry civil servants had to work with tens of trade associations but at the new DCLG it has seemed to many that the state has been trying to restrict the number of civil society voices with whom it is prepared to dialogue. Consequently, it has been suggested, faiths have been forced to devise organisational structures which distort their core mission – or have risked being called "unrepresentative" because their outlooks do not coincide exactly with government.

It is Dr Bari's argument in this paper that the Muslim Council of Britain has now become a prime target of such selective conversation. I welcome it as one contribution to the discussion which we will continue to debate in the months to come.

Francis Davis
Director and Fellow
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¹ T. Modood (2008) *Muslims, Equality and Secularism* in B. Spalek and A. Imtoul Religion, Spirituality And The Social Sciences (Policy Press).

² F. Davis (2009) *Ideas, Institutions and Poverty Reduction: Questions for a Theology of Governance* in International Journal of Public Theology (Brill, Leiden) Vol 3, 1.

Introduction

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful. Assalamu Alaykum. I greet you with the Muslim greeting of ‘Peace Be Upon You’.

First, I must thank the Las Casas Institute for inviting me to deliver this lecture. The work undertaken by the Institute is extremely valuable in opening up dialogue around one of the most important issues of our time: the role ethics, governance and human rights (and the contribution that faith communities make to them).

I have been asked in this paper to offer a defence of the values we all share – the freedoms that underpin the democratic state and which allow our diverse and pluralistic society to exist.

As I write, our world is passing through a stark contrast between the worst of times and the best of hope. We find ourselves face-to-face with conflicting emotions of despair and optimism. Despair because of the spectre of a global economic meltdown, climate change and the risk to our security. Optimism because the world witnessed the art of the possible in the Obama victory and the change in emphasis that it ushered from confrontation to conciliation.

Engage or Enrage? The Problem With Domestic Policy

In our country, this change is beginning to filter through to our foreign policy – for example, our Foreign Secretary wrote recently that the Foreign Office will no longer be using the phrase “War on Terror.” This is a welcome shift away from simplistic rhetoric and, I hope, towards a more nuanced understanding of how we in the West interact with the rest of the world.

Sadly, domestic policy remains muddled, unsure of its aims and methods. It seems that on our shores, the War on Terror and the divisive but discredited “Clash of Civilisations” rhetoric is alive and thriving. The events running up to, and the manner in which the Contest 2 anti-terror strategy was recently published, is a case in point. It appears the Cabinet Ministers who deal with community issues are out of touch with the real sentiments of our communities.

On the surface, it seems like the strategy as it now stands has made progress. For the first time the government acknowledges what has long been common knowledge – our foreign policy has directly contributed to radicalisation in a small section of our Muslim community. The Contest 2 strategy claims to have a programme that will tackle both the “symptoms and the causes of terrorism.” And it

³ G. Davie (2007) *The Sociology of Religion – New Horizons* Sage

⁴ F. Davis, E. Paulhus and A. Bradstock (2008) *Moral, But No Compass – Church, Government And The Future of Welfare* Matthew James: Chelmsford.

says that we now have a “new and deeper understanding of how radicalisation works.”

But scratch the surface and you will see this is not quite the case. The draft version, as reported in the media, assumed that there was a “conveyor belt to terrorism” – a natural progression from certain religious beliefs to the act of killing and maiming fellow human beings.

For example, it stated that believing that homosexuality is a sin makes a person an extremist – even though many who uphold that belief also understand that those who choose to practice homosexuality should not be persecuted or discriminated against.

That assertion was withdrawn when it was pointed out that it classed millions of Jews, Christians, atheists and members of other faiths as extremists. But the underlying thinking remains, leaving us with a strategy that talks about “engagement” while at the same time drawing up prohibitive lists of who does and does not deserve to be engaged with.

This approach is articulated by an increasingly powerful lobby, some funded by the government, that sees the Muslim community as the biggest threat to Britain’s security and way of life – a fifth column mobilising to undermine the nation. Made up of a vocal but divisive collection of pressure groups, think-tanks, bloggers and journalists, this lobby advocates that we refuse to engage with any group that does not ascribe to a certain set of values – as defined by their own divisive rhetoric. Those who do not fit their bill should be classed as pariahs, by-passed in favour of more compliant interlocutors. Muslims are now seen by some politicians in the two main parties as individuals, not as a community. Is this going to be the case with other faith and ethnic communities?

Firstly, it reinforces the perception among some sections of the Muslim community that the political process is futile. It removes from the agenda key concerns like Israel’s continued violations of international law and the invasion of Iraq. It refuses to see a link between actions and consequences.

Secondly, it increases the sense among Muslims that they are unfairly targeted. It subjects them to a loyalty-test that is not expected of anyone else and it deems many beliefs and actions “disloyal” even though they do not contravene any law of the land.

Finally, and most worryingly, it stops the possibility of dialogue with those who hold views seen as “unacceptable”, meaning that they cannot articulate their position or cannot engage with others in order to arrive at a collective and more nuanced position.

I believe that there is a growing understanding in some sections of the government about the roots of extremism and the divisive role played by the slogans like “War on Terror.” But this new understanding is undermined by those who see no middle ground, or room for accommodation and adjustment. They are still choosing to hang on to simplistic notions of ‘you are either with us or against us’. The result is further marginalisation, more hostility, fear and suspicion – the ideal conditions for extremism to breed.

Domestic Policy in Action

Recently, we were treated to a very public case study of this new understanding with the Deputy Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain, Dr Daud Abdullah. A document that he signed in Istanbul has become a *cause celebre* for Islamophobes and reactionaries to gather round and use as a stick to beat the Muslim community.

A mistranslated version of what is now being termed as the ‘Istanbul Declaration’ has been circulated and certain points have been made known to the commentariat and the media. In particular, the Deputy Secretary General has been accused of condoning attacks on our armed forces and attacks and persecution of the Jewish community, our cousins in faith.

A couple of weeks ago, I was contacted by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) with an outright demand that I summarily dismiss the Deputy Secretary General or face cessation of links between the government and the Muslim Council of Great Britain (MCB). This demand was not only an outrageous interference in the affairs of an independent body; it also required me to breach the democratic constitution of the MCB, something outside my remit. Sadly, the DCLG Secretary of State (Mrs Hazel Blears) acted out on impulse. By threatening to disengage with the largest Muslim umbrella group she is marginalising the very people she wants on board. It is ironic that the day our government launched the Contest 2 strategy, some of its sections chose to ostracize the largest Muslim organisation in the country.

Before I continue, there are some things I must say as I believe it is expected of me: The MCB condemns terrorism and believes in the power of dialogue to bring about change.

Our Deputy Secretary General, Dr Daud Abdullah has gone on record to state that he condemns the targeting of any religious or non-religious community, and that he does not condone attacks on the members of our armed forces. There is a strong and long-standing link between Muslim communities and the British Armed Forces. Only four months ago, I stood with fellow Britons on ‘Remembrance Sunday’ to remember our soldiers, many of whom were Muslims and died fighting fascists in the Second World War.

The MCB recognises this link and respects the professionalism and dedication of our Armed Forces. We have been working with all three Services to encourage British Muslims to serve our country. Moreover, the MCB has actively engaged in building bridges with people of all faiths and none. We have sought to reach out to our cousins in the Jewish community, and we never have, nor ever will, condone any attacks on their community. We may have differences over the Middle East, but there is much more that unites us than divides us.

Our detractors have conveniently sought to forget our track record by manufacturing fantasies. Sadly, a section of our government has also chosen to side with such inferences and borrow their lexicon and worldview.

In Defence of Shared Values

Putting aside the whole catalogue of accusations, I would like to point to the two main accusations that our detractors use regularly: The first is that we are unrepresentative of the Muslim community as a whole and the second that we are not doing enough to police our community and root out extremism.

I would like to give you a very brief account of what we have done towards this aim.

In 2004, fifty-two year old English civil engineer Ken Bigley was kidnapped along with two American co-workers in Baghdad. The kidnappers demanded the release of all female Iraqi prisoners, failing which they threatened to kill the hostages. They soon carried out their threat, saving Mr. Bigley as the final bargaining chip.

As our government could not be seen to negotiate directly with terrorists, it was willing to solicit support from others. Our now maligned Deputy Secretary General, Dr Daud Abdullah, disregarded umpteen death threats and travelled to Iraq, one of the most dangerous places on earth at that time. Tragically Mr. Bigley was killed by his captors, but it affirmed our commitment to work together, even in the most dangerous circumstances and showed that we are prepared to stand by what we believe in. Similarly, in 2007, we tried our best to secure the release of our Royal Navy troops from Iranian custody.

The MCB and Dr. Dr Abdullah have passed a loyalty test, a thousand times over, much more profound than the checklist proposed by the Contest 2. I believe that this goes some way towards answering the criticism that we do not do enough.

The second criticism I referred to earlier is that the MCB does not represent the Muslim community. We have never claimed to represent all and everyone, but we do represent a large section of the Muslims in this country. About 500 mosques and community groups with a large and diverse following are affiliated to us that make us the broadest umbrella group of Muslims in the country. But if there are elements in our government who do not wish to talk to us, they are entitled not to. However, I must point out that in the world of mutual respect engagement is a two way process.

More pertinently, what impact does that have on the aims of the Contest 2 strategy? What is the effect of choosing to listen only to a handful of lobbies that have appeared out of nowhere in the last few years – the benefactors of a massive stimulus package to the “prevent economy”?

Put simply, the effect is that millions of pounds and thousands of man-hours are being wasted on a PR exercise that aims to make some in government look more attractive to anti-Muslim bigots. Because there is no credibility behind the cash, and because it tries to bypass established networks, this approach, euphemistically called “choosing our friends wisely”, cannot hope to achieve its aims.

If Muslims, as individuals and groups are not allowed to take part in the life of this nation without first signing an anti-extremism waiver as defined by dogmatic and self-appointed group of ideologues, they may be forgiven for being sceptical of the message they hear.

We have seen how increased restrictions on the right to protest have been applied not just to the Muslim groups, but to anyone who wants to take to the streets. We have seen anti-terror laws like RIPA used by councils to enforce minor by-laws. We have seen, in the case of Binyam Mohammed, that there is a very dark side to our ethical foreign policy. And if we allow the process of ideological vetting and dogmatic policies to dictate us, they will only spread until we find that we have sacrificed our liberties in the attempt to save them.

A Different Side

This sorry affair is instructive for many of us. It illustrates again the keenness of some to highlight our alleged disloyalty to this country we love. Many delight in trumpeting how different we are and how we have no interest in living with others. They are keen to enter into what some call ‘dog-whistle politics’, using coded language to make the rest of Britain more suspicious of us and more doubtful of our contribution to society.

Of course, none of this has any bearing on reality. The Citizenship Survey for England and Wales 2007 found that on the question of community cohesion, 84% of ethnic groups felt that there was good community cohesion compared with 81% of white people with “little variation in perceptions of cohesion across individual ethnic groups”.

On the question of feeling and belonging to Britain the results are quite staggering:

According to the survey, “there is only very limited variation in feelings of belonging to Britain by ethnicity.” It showed that the sense of belonging to Britain was generally higher among ethnic minorities than among the indigenous population.

Nevertheless, these notions of positive belonging are ignored, and we have now entered into a discussion on shared values, and have attempted to reframe common understandings of what it means to be British.

That discussion has often taken place at the expense of Muslims, with media reports anxious in describing how different we Muslims are. This has led the fair-minded journalists such as Peter Osborne to say “We should all feel a little bit ashamed about the way we treat Muslims in the media, in our politics, and on our streets. They are our fellow citizens, yet often we barely acknowledge them. We misrepresent and in certain cases persecute them. We do not treat Muslims with the tolerance, decency and fairness that we so often like to boast is the British way. We urgently need to change our public culture.”

Peter Osborne points to an understanding of Britishness that many of us hold, love and cherish: of the decency of humans, of resilience in adversity, and of the need to look out for your neighbour in times of need.

Despite the call for a compassionate discourse on our notions of Britishness, I know that many people

fear that the gap cannot be bridged. They fear that each side has mutually exclusive and non-negotiable values. They fear that being a Muslim is incompatible with being a 21st Century Briton. We have always and will continue to argue that no such incompatibility exists. Our faith is the best repudiation of extremism, and our faith is an agency for social cohesion.

Our faith demands active encounters. In the Muslim holy book, the Qur'an, God tells us "O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, so that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most God-conscious of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware." (Al-Hujurat, Verse 14).

How wrong we are to interpret and employ our 'otherness' to create division and discord while the primary purpose of this 'otherness' was nothing except to enhance awareness and understanding. It is also, like so many such exhortations in the Qur'an, a call to know and understand one another. It is a clear repudiation of the idea that we must lead separate lives.

One must acknowledge that there will be some very difficult conversations. And there will be some issues that would be hard to resolve. But we must commit ourselves to a continuous dialogue that is not dominated by extremists, on either side.

And there must be a basic acceptance, on all sides, among individuals and among groups that Britain has a set of organic values which are arrived at through consensus and accommodation, not through diktat and bluster. It allows us all to be able to say, with one voice that we reject hateful speech. We can say no together to violence in the name of any ideology. We can say no together to attacks on religious or personal freedom. We can say no together to torture and imprisonment without trial.

The Silent Majority.

In this paper I appeal to the Moderate British Majority, of which Muslims are just one, integral, part. I believe the vast majority of British people know what is and what is not extremism. They know the difference between disagreeing with someone – no matter how strongly – and deliberately creating discord. And I hope they know that checklists and loyalty tests are absurd. I hope they know that atrocities like 7/7, the murder of Ken Bigley and the World Trade Centre attacks were rejected by the Muslim majority as '*Not In My Name*'.

I hope they will recognise the fact that the MCB not only recognises, but strives to uphold the values of tolerance, understanding, democracy and the right to individual conscience. There are answers to the questions we have been too afraid to ask.

There are answers to the problems that we don't want to deal with. It will take effort on all our parts. I look forward to the challenge, and to all that we stand to learn.

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This pamphlet is supported by the MB Reckitt Trust and the Daughters of Jesus.

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