

# MODEST UNDERSTANDING SYMPATHETIC LOVING INTELLIGENT MODERATE

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**MUSLIM: THE REPORT OF THE SECOND  
YOUNG BRITISH MUSLIM CONFERENCE**

18<sup>th</sup> October 2007

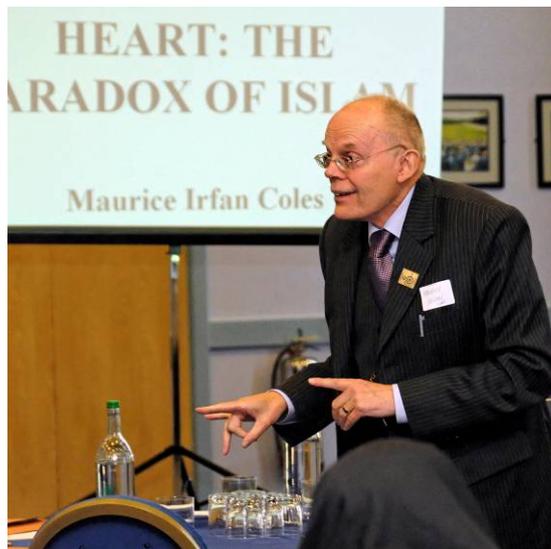
Galpharm Stadium, Huddersfield





## PREFACE

This report summarises a conference held in Huddersfield in October 2007 attended by over eighty 16-19 year old British Muslims from Oldham, Bradford and Leeds. It forms part of a longer publication which includes a composite of the main findings derived from both young British Muslim conferences (September 2005, October 2007) the discrete reports of both, and a number of appendices. Part One of '*Muslim*' includes the background to the conference, the aims of the day, and the conference narrative. The second part is the substantive report of the conference findings containing the Young People's views in some detail. The final section summarizes their evaluations and suggestions for the way forward. It contains their opinions on a range of issues as recorded and reported by the excellent facilitators and scribes who produced notes, which, when typed created a large number of pages of bullet points. I have edited their comments and where possible I have used the language of young people themselves. Editing, perforce, requires a selection process but I hope that I have produced a document that is close to the spirit of the interesting, diverse and dynamic views of the young Muslims present on the day.



The conference was kindly financed by the Home Office and was jointly planned and executed by Richard Gore, from Oldham Council's Children and Young People's and Families Department, Fazal Rahim, the Co-ordinator of the Interfaith Forum, Oldham and Kashaf Feroz of the Oak Project. A great debt of gratitude is owed to all three without whom the conference simply would not have happened. Finally, all praise and blessings must be given to the nine young people who set the themes and facilitated the workshops during the day for it was their work, commitment and inspiration that made the day so wonderfully successful.



**Maurice Irfan Coles,**  
School Development Support Agency,  
Leicester, July 2008

## PART ONE:

### 1.1 BACKGROUND:

The SDSA orchestrated a hugely successful Home Office financed Young British Muslim conference which took place in September 2005 in Leicester and involved some one hundred and twenty 15-19 year olds from Leicester, Coventry and Birmingham. The September conference was so successful and pioneering that it received over three and half minutes of coverage on BBC News that evening. The full report of that day, *Faithful and Proud*, can be downloaded from the SDSA website ([www.sdsa.net](http://www.sdsa.net)). Seeking funding for such events is never easy but with the help and support of Maqsood Ahmed from the Department of Communities and Local Government, government financed was finally secured. As the first conference was Midlands based, it was decided to go north and undertake a similar process. The SDSA had previously worked in Oldham with Richard Gore who had always been hugely supportive of the idea. His involvement secured the support of two local leaders, Fazal Rahim, Co-ordinator of the Interfaith Forum and Kashaf Feroz of the Oak Project. This local link was decisive because their good offices secured the young people who facilitated the October conference itself.

**The uniqueness of this model is that its themes were chosen by a group of 12 young Muslims of both genders** who underwent a day and a



half days facilitator training based upon the principles of Philosophy for Children (P4C), which was expertly delivered by Richard Gore himself. These young people not only set the agenda, they facilitated almost all the sixteen workshops provided throughout the day. Participants chose their workshops from a list that included education, identity, media, culture versus religion, Islamophobia, terrorism and a

deeper understanding of Islam. The young facilitators decided upon their own stimuli, orchestrated the discussion, and helped their peers to come to conclusions about the issues. They organised each workshop around debate about the major issues, and then sought the views of their peers as to recommended actions.

### 1.2 THE CONFERENCE ITSELF

The conference aimed to: -

1. Explore some of the key issues that surround what it means to be a young Muslim growing up in Britain in the 21st century
2. Seek young Muslims' views on these key issues

3. Discuss in more depth identity, education, media, gender, racism and terrorism
4. Make a series of recommendations as to how their school/college, government (local and national), and communities might progress the agenda
5. Provide an enjoyable and high quality day for all participants

The conference began with a Quranic recitation delivered by one participant, and was opened by Richard Gore who explained the background, context and aims. He then introduced the GW Theatre Company who performed excerpts from of their play, **From One Extreme to Another**. This deals head on with some of the most sensitive issues that surround religious, political and racial extremism but is delivered in a language accessible to young people and in a context which they well understand. Following the performance the characters stayed in role and were questioned by the audience as to their motives in behaving in such a way. Part of the approach is that much of the material and certainly the cross examinations deal with controversial issues often with humour which provided a safer space for further discussion.



The keynote delivered by the Islamic convert (revert), Maurice Irfan Coles was entitled '*Towards an Islamic Republic of the Heart: the Paradox of Islam*'. He highlighted some of the key issues that face British Muslims in the 21st century. Why was it, he challenged, that Muslims were at the bottom of every league table: school, health, housing, and employment, had the fastest growing prison population and one of the highest divorce and suicide rates inn the country? **His basic argument was that the Qur'an encourages Muslims to take an active part in citizenship, to live their faith through good deeds, religious tolerance and healthy dialogue between all groups.**

The final plenary session, orchestrated by Kashaf Feroz, brought together some of the key issues and some of the main recommended points for action. **All participants agreed that the conference would be a major failure if no action resulted from the stimulating workshop discussions.** The day finished, as it started, in prayer.

## PART TWO: THE WORKSHOP ISSUES EXPLORED

Eight themes were offered, all of which ran twice. Seven of the areas are covered discreetly. The material from the eighth, *identity*, has been subsumed

into the general text especially within the evaluations and the recommendations.

## 2.1 EDUCATION:

### Commentary:

This workshop was well attended in both sessions and participants began by attempting to define the characteristics of a good Muslim, and outline who transmits Islamic rules and principles. This led to serious discussion about the quality of education offered in mainstream secondary schools. Participants concluded by summing up and making a number of recommendations for improvement of the education service.



It was generally believed that **a good Muslim was a person who:**

- **Followed the rules** of Islam by praying five times a day, reading the Qu'ran, observing Ramadan
- Subscribed to the fundamental **beliefs** of Islam
- **'Cared with all their heart'**
- Had the **right intention**; accepting that often humans intend to do right but cannot always translate this into action
- **Practised** their religion in every day actions

- **Believed in peace**
- Stayed on the **right path**.
- Similarly, both groups were clear that the **faith was transmitted by groups on the following list**, which appears in no priority order:
  - Parents
  - Siblings like elder brothers and sisters, and cousins
  - The extended family
  - Friends
  - Imams
  - Madrasah teachers
  - Mainstream school teachers both Muslims and non-Muslims, especially in subjects like RE and History
  - The media-like the Islam channel
  - Reading the Qu'ran

Much of this was eloquently summed up by one student, who had probably listened attentively to the morning inputs, who said **'we learn best through discourse,'** that is by talking and arguing about the nature of Islam and its place in the contemporary world with as many groups as possible.

Participants discussed, and were extremely critical of much of the curriculum that was offered in mainstream schools. Generally they felt that their religious and cultural heritages were not effectively dealt with in lessons like RE and history, and teachers fought shy of some of the more contentious issues in science, such as creationism versus evolution. Even when topics with Islamic relevance were taught they were not always adequately addressed from an Islamic perspective. There were, they believed, too few 'Islamic books, insufficient prayer facilities in some schools, and too few Muslim staff.'

Participants were generally happy with the teaching in madrasahs and the subject did not give rise to any significant debate about the nature of teaching offered. Participants did, however, want closer links between madrasahs and mainstream schools and wanted more imams to visit these schools.

Although the debate concentrated very much upon faith based issues in an educational context, interestingly, the overarching solutions offered were not exclusively Islamic. There was a general call for more activities of an interfaith

nature, more interactive dialogue which would **'bring people together from all different groups.'**

**Young British Muslims, therefore, recommended the following action:**

- R.1 Critically revise the curriculum so that Muslim perspectives were adequately represented
- R.2 Provide more Islamic books and resources in school
- R.3 Appoint more Muslim staff
- R.4 Offer better training to all staff on issues that affect Muslims
- R.5 Offer better facilities for Muslim pupils in schools like prayer rooms and faith clubs
- R.6 Encourage madrasahs to be more closely involved in mainstream
- R.7 Organise more interactive/ interfaith activities so that Catholics and Muslims and all faiths can share and debate.

## **2.2 THE MEDIA**

### **Commentary:**

The media workshops proved to be very popular and the young people involved were stimulated by their lively facilitators to voice their opinions on a range of sensitive topics. Discussion centred on the issue of Muslim role models (or lack of them) within the media, and the complete absence of positive coverage concerning the Prophet (PBUH) as a political and spiritual leader. The facilitators were very clear that their overall aim was to be positive and to offer some practical guidance as to how the media could present Muslim issues in a more balanced way than at present.



**There were several overarching perceptions that emerged from both workshops:**

- The word Muslim was usually associated with negative media coverage
- The media focused on Muslim identity as the key factor, and not on the individual actions. Why, for example, was the word 'Muslim' stressed when reporting the 'home-grown Muslim bombers,' rather than home-grown British bombers?
- The accuracy of much of the coverage was in serious doubt
- **'The media only shows Muslims as terrorists'**
- The Prophet (PBUH) was often portrayed as a narrow minded fanatic in a way which was totally inaccurate, judgemental and prejudiced and which could be seen as blasphemous.
- There were very few positive role models. Amir Khan was one but there questions as to how much his position was genuine and how much he had ben forced to act in such a way.
- The most positive role model Muslims have is the Prophet (PBUH) but this was never portrayed in the media.
- 'Muslims are often laughed at. Why? How does it affect our self-esteem and self image? Is it allowed to happen in the name of freedom of speech, if so, where are our rights?'

**Young British Muslims, therefore, recommended the following action:**

- R.8 Ensure a better and fairer sense of balance in media coverage
- R.9 Provide more positive stories, often local ones, to counteract the overwhelming negativity
- R.9 Offer training to those working in the media so that they understand the issues better
- R.10 ***'Don't focus on Muslims-focus on the individual'***
- R.11 Use the media to educate people about the Islam with programmes about the faith and how it is practised, especially at prime time
- R.12 Encourage more Muslims to enter the media and the world of entertainment so that, for example, they appear as characters in soap operas
- R.13 Have more programmes involving faith based groups

## 2.3 TERRORISM

### Commentary

This well orchestrated workshop evoked considerable and heated debate about the nature and causes of terrorism, and demonstrated a deep distrust of British and American foreign policy and the *'true motives* and the *'true facts.'* behind it. The underlying moral hypocrisy felt by many young British Muslims appears to have simply fuelled a range of conspiracy theories about the relationship between America and Bin Laden, leading some even to question whether Bin Laden was a myth created to advance a particular ideological world view. The workshops, however, revealed **a deep sense of revulsion** against acts of terrorism committed by a minority in the name of Islam, whilst at the same time acknowledging that **'terrorists use convincing lies.'** Participants strongly and deeply felt the negative impact upon them as ordinary law abiding Muslims who wanted to live good and decent lives as their faith prescribes. For some, they now felt afraid to practise their religion, and as one participant movingly said, ***'terrorism has affected the way we grow up.'***

As in all the workshops the media is singled out for their Muslim coverage, with some participants arguing strongly against media stereotyping and its overwhelming negativity which further fuels Islamophobia. But with startling and striking honesty much of the criticism is levelled at the Muslim communities themselves.



Participants thought that the various sects within Islam were 'divided' and engaged in 'a power struggle.' **They urged a return to the basics of the faith, the basics of the religion of love and peace**

**There were several overarching perceptions that emerged from both workshops. These centre upon:**

- The negative impact of British foreign policy and its 'illegal war' which had had damaging repercussions in the Muslim world. This in turn had provided Islamic extremists with a vehicle to spread their lies more effectively *'because lies are more exciting.'*
- The negative impact of terror on the whole Muslim community who had been targeted and stereotyped because of the actions of a tiny *'bad minority'*. The *'fear and hatred this has caused'*, as people react upon the

bias of their own (mis)understanding, and make judgements based upon the actions of minorities.

- The issue of the nature of terrorism itself and the complete rejection of their ideology, and their killing of innocent people. ***'Terrorists fight only for themselves not for religion,'*** and ***'jihad is inner struggle'***
- The issue of justice, truth and moral hypocrisy with the underlying causes of the war in Iraq perceived as *'being a hidden agenda'* more concerned with oil, wealth and power than with democracy and justice
- The issue of an education which did not adequately reflect the need of British Muslims, especially in areas like History and politics
- The issue of what all this means for Muslims themselves, and for the education of Muslims within Islam.
- The issue of the divisions within Islam and *'the power struggle between Muslim sects.'*
- The issue of positive role models, because *'some Muslims are bad role models who send the wrong vibes to the world.'*



**Young British Muslims, therefore, recommended the following action:**

***For Muslims themselves:***

- R.14 ***'Muslims need to go back to basics because we are divided'***
- R.15 Muslims need to interact and start working with the wider communities to remove misconceptions
- R.16 *'Muslims need to stop blaming everybody else and start being positive role models.'*

***For the British Government***

*Foreign policy:*

- R.17 ***'Be just in your foreign policy'***
- R.18 *'Be fair in trials-Guantanamo Bay'*
- R.19 *'The government should change its foreign policy.'*

### *Education Policy:*

R.20 Examine and change the curriculum from Islamic perspectives in subject particular like RE, History, and politics in both the secondary and the further education sectors

R.21 Celebrate similarities between us, not stress the differences

## **2.4 RELIGION VERSUS CULTURE**

### **Commentary:**

The workshop facilitator, a young woman operating by herself, bravely and successfully tackled an area over which scholars wrangle and write leaned tomes. The workshops covered issues like the distinction between religion and culture, the position of women within Islam, the equality of treatment offered, and the sensitive and thorny problem of so-called honour killings. The workshops concluded with a plea for greater debate, better education and for women to make a stronger mark in society. It particularly recommended parent education!

**There were several overarching issues that emerged from both workshops. These centre upon:**

- The fact that ***'people can't differentiate between religion and culture.'*** This lack of differentiation in turn causes all sorts of problems particularly related to relationships and the position of women in Islam.
- Cultural aspects appear stronger. Participants believed, especially when it came to sexism. The Qu'ran had been misinterpreted, they asserted, to the disadvantage of women. *'It is fine for men to date/marry who they want-why do women not get equal treatment?'* challenged one participant. *'You don't choose who you fall in love with. Islam accepts marriage outside families but **culture changes beliefs,**'* cited another. A third put it even more succinctly, ***'Islam accepts marriage of love providing they are Muslim but culture overpowers.'***
- Particular anguish appears to have been caused by the issue of so-called 'honour killings,' perhaps because the stimulus material encouraged lively debate. This debate moved from a more open ended question as to whether such killings were justified by the Qu'ran or were culturally driven, to outright Qur'anic condemnation of such acts. *'No religion condones killing; there is*



*no such thing as honour killings,' and even more explicitly, 'honour killing is not Islamic.'*

- Education, or more precisely the lack of education, was seen as the root cause of these misinterpretations. This was equally true of issues surrounding equality as well as 'honour.' The problem for many participants was that their parents view the world/life differently, *'as they often ignored the fact that we have been brought up in a different environment/society to them.'* For some, this was compounded by the issue of double standards and hypocrisy.

**Young British Muslims, therefore, recommended the following action:**

R.22 There should be more education for parents about relationships

R.23 There should be more education generally about these issues, *'because education is the primary foundation.'*

R.24 There should be more debate about the issue of culture and religion so that people can differentiate between what is cultural and Quranically based

R.24 Women should be encouraged to make their mark on society.

## **2.5 ISLAMOPHOBIA**

### **Commentary:**

This extremely stimulating workshop received some excellent evaluations and appears to have stimulated both a lot of discussion and new thinking. For many of the participants discussions as to the meaning of the term, the causes and consequences of Islamophobia and its overall relationship to institutional racism was something they had not really discussed or considered before. *'It had never really affected me'*, one student said, *'but I now begin to understand something of what it means.'* Another concluded that, *'many non-Muslims make sweeping assumptions about Muslims-both positive and negative-sometimes despite considerable experience of working with Muslims.'* It is a great testimony to the young female facilitator that she tackled this complex and large area in such way as to make it accessible to all those in her workshop. *'The issue of Islamophobia affects us all, and we should become more proactively involved in combating it.'*



**Young British Muslims, therefore, recommended the following action:**

R.25 There should be more positive and educational Islamic programmes on television.

R.26 The Government should restrict the media to ensure that any Islamophobia is legally dealt with.

R.27 Education is crucial. All schools should teach about the positive aspects of Islam in schools from an early age.

R.28 The government should take more measures to ensure equal opportunities in jobs and education.

## **2.6 A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF ISLAM**

### **Commentary:**

Unlike their brothers and sisters in the Midlands conference, two of the facilitators decided to plan and implement a workshop that dealt directly with issues about understanding Islam. Their workshop discussions centred upon the very essence of Islam itself, which ended in **a heartfelt plea to go back to basics, to the fundamental beliefs of Islam without cultural and political overlays.** Participants were very clear about the centrality of the Qu'ran, *'the light of guidance'* and of the issues for young people surrounding understanding its core messages. They were concerned that young children were unable to understand the Qu'ran because it was often delivered in a language they did not really know, and often without explanation.

They were similarly clear about the position of the Prophet as *the* role model. For them, being a Muslim was about **following the right path, not merely following instructions.** It was, they believed *'easy to be led astray,'* not to understand that following the word of God and praying led to rewards. For them Islam promoted peace and unity and was about enlightenment and responsibility within a clear framework of rules. There was a lively discussion also about nasheeds and whether or not the music and lyrics were prohibited (haram) or allowed (halal). It was agreed that music was the modern way to spread Islam but there were issues about the use of instruments other than percussion. There were those believed outside this tradition everything was haram.



**Young British Muslims, therefore, recommended that Muslims themselves need to:-**

- R.29 **'Go back to the basics – have clarity about the fundamental beliefs'**
- R.30 Use the Qu'ran as a light of guidance
- R.31 Use the Prophet (PBUH) as the role model
- R.32 Ensure that children recite and understand Qu'ran both in Arabic but also in a language with which they are familiar
- R.33 'Translate' the Qu'ran into child friendly language
- R.34 Respect all their neighbours and treat other faiths fairly so that people view Islam positively.
- R.35 Use their religion in a positive way so that they achieve academically but show that Islam is the influence
- R.36 Establish a news channel which gave an Islamic point of view to counter negative press coverage
- R.37 Establish a nasheed channel with positive role models like Sami Yusuf as an alternative to western influences.

This workshop devised a wonderful mnemonic, which really encapsulates the whole tone of the conference. For the young people present being a Muslim meant being:

**M**ODEST  
**U**NDERSTANDING  
**S**YMPATHETIC  
**L**OVING  
**I**NTELLIGENT  
**M**ODERATE



### **PART THREE: EVALUATIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD**

#### **WHAT DID PARTICIPANTS THINK ABOUT THE DAY'S CONFERENCE?**

100% of people who filled in the evaluations thought the conference was good or excellent, with 80% rating it as excellent. Words like *'wonderful,' 'stimulating,' 'brilliant'* and *'excellent'* pepper the evaluations; as do *'thank you'* and *'Jazakallah'*. (God bless you) *'Recommended to all, and well worth going*

to *Masha'Allah*, 'wrote *one*, and another found that the normal superlatives were inadequate: '*It was,*' they wrote, '*Very excellent;*' and '***I did not believe it would be this good...If I could do it again, I would!***'

Many respondents were refreshingly honest about what they had learnt and what the conferences meant to them. The following are typical of many of the received comments

✚ '*I now have a deeper understanding of the needs of Muslims. It made me think about how I educate myself*'

✚ '*I learnt about how much culture influences the way we behave*'

✚ '*I realized how much our culture influences religion and that they shouldn't be used as synonyms, interchangeable with one another*'

✚ '***The issues about identity which I couldn't raise with my friends or family. I got to know a lot about how people should act in a way which would make them a religious person and make them proud of living what they are***'



And it would appear the organisers got the tone right, even for the few non-Muslims who attended.

✚ '*It was a very positive and experience, a supportive atmosphere. I felt very included and welcomed as a non-Muslim.*'

**All** aspects of the conference received significant praise with, it would appear, the right balance between the play, Maurice Irfan Coles' spoken input, and the workshops. Some however wanted less talk and more workshops. Many wanted a longer conference, perhaps over two days, with even more topics covered. Several suggested it should be an annual event. Many also believed that the next conference should involve other faiths and be more cross cultural. The interactive play was well received: '*a good start to the day,*' reported one; and the play '*allows a safe space for young people to engage with controversial issues,*' said another.

Maurice Irfan Coles, Alhamdulillah and in all humility appears to have struck a chord with many participants. '*Talking to Maurice Irfan Coles was amazing. I really enjoyed talking about the principles of education,*' enthused one. '*Brilliant! Maurice's talk-highly inspiring,*' claimed another; and a third did not spare his blushes when she wrote, '*Maurice is a very cool guy and extremely inspiring. We think he's great.*'

The workshops, however, received the most praise of all, with over two thirds of respondents commenting very positively. This repeated the same pattern as in the first conference probably because when you are working with your peers there is no sense of hierarchy, no sense of holding back because of what the teachers or parents might say. That they were so well received is a great testimony to the facilitators themselves and to the training offered by Richard Gore. The following comments about the workshops are typical of those received:

- ✚ *'The workshops were good, allowing us to have our own views and opinions'*
- ✚ *'The workshops were stimulating and educational'*
- ✚ *'Loved the workshops'*
- ✚ *'Talking to other young Muslims was very stimulating'*
- ✚ *'The workshops tackled problems in a very respectful manner'*
- ✚ *'It was a really inspiring day out. I also became a lot more confident in group discussions.'*

And, perhaps most significantly of all, ***'All the young people engaged in discussions and made excellent recommendations. They are citizens of this country; they want to make a positive contribution.'***

Thankfully, and unsurprisingly there were a few critical comments. One respondent felt the facilitators *'could do with some more training.'* Another lamented that *'the facilitator did not welcome or listen to views that were not his own.'* These however were the only two negative comments receive either verbally or in writing.

#### **POSTSCRIPT: WHAT OF THE FUTURE?**

There was an overwhelming desire to have more conferences like the Huddersfield event. All respondents felt that their leaning had been enhanced and that they knew more about their faith and the issues surrounding it as a result of the conference. As in the Leicester event, many participants wanted an event that would involve a wider faith and non faith audience, one that stressed interfaith and intercultural events. As one respondent put it, *'It would be challenging to face other' people's comments from different faith groups.'* The challenge for schools and colleges, for local and central government and for the local Muslim communities is equally stark: this conference has revealed the depth of love and compassion, the strength of genuine faith and belief in a religion of peace and tolerance, of openness and discourse. How can we collectively and individually build on this so that all our Muslim young people believe and achieve?





Further copies of this publication can be downloaded from <http://www.sdsa.net>

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