

TOWARDS AN ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF THE HEART

Speech delivered by
Maurice Irfan Coles

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PREAMBLE

This is not an exact transcript of the speech I delivered to the 120 young British Muslims at Walkers Stadium, Leicester. It is based upon the PowerPoint presentation made and which appeared in the participants' pack. But, like all speeches that are later written, it does not include the asides, the 'throw-away' lines nor the humour which, I believe especially in such difficult times for Muslims, is so very, very important. My talks are invariably interactive – it keeps the audience awake if they think I might ask them a question. Such interaction can appear trivial when written-up, though at the time, they are normally pertinent and sharp. I have, therefore, excluded these too.

What follows is the talk's major thesis, including the key Quranic and Sunnah quotes.

My talk had six aims. It hoped to:-

- Set the context for the workshop tasks
- Highlight some of the major issues that face us as British Muslims in the 21st century
- Place the arguments within a clear Islamic Frame of Reference
- Encourage discourse
- Encourage young British Muslims to become active citizens and to inform the debate at every level
- Explain what I meant by, '**The Islamic Republic of the Heart!**'

Participants were clearly told that this was a major opportunity for them, and that each one of them had the 'ear' of major politicians, policy makers and those that influenced decision at the highest. Such groups, it was explained, needed their understanding and views about the major issues that confront us, as British Muslims, here and now talking, however was cheap and easy. What the conference wanted was their views about what **actions** they thought their school or college, local and central government, and their communities should take. Discussion without action helps clarify debate, but is ultimately sterile. My talk centred around seven issues. These were the issues that the young facilitators themselves had identified during their training sessions.

KEY ISSUE ONE: IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Participants were asked to discuss the following two questions with their neighbour:-

- Why are you a Muslim?
- What makes a good Muslim?

After taking various comments and views from the young participants, I suggested that they might (and did) come up with the following sort of answers.

- The will of Allah
- Reciting the Shahadah

- Performing Salat and mosque attendance
- Possessing Quranic knowledge and understanding of the sunnah
- Being pious
- Doing good works, based upon Islamic principles
- Or is it merely an accident of birth

There were two basic questions that needed answering. Firstly, can you have an understanding of divine texts, be pious and still not be a good Muslim? Secondly, and almost more importantly, **participants were asked to consider if they felt that Muslims are better than followers of other faiths, or people of no faith?**

Sadly, in my perception which is based upon extensive travel in the Muslim world and my sojourn in London, Birmingham and now Leicester, some Muslims did not always present in the best light. Some considered themselves better than other groups, did not want to mix but remain aloof and superior. Others, and by far the majority of young Muslims, want to become a dynamic part of the society in which they live, whilst retaining their strong faith.

For me as a Muslim convert, or 'revert' as many Muslims say, it was a matter of trying to get back to my view of the essence of Islam, a view that went back to the Quran and the authenticated sunnah, as the key determinants. I was lucky because I came without any cultural baggage. I did not have Asian sub-continental or Arab parents, who had expectations of me, expectations they thought were Islamic but which sometimes were based upon cultural and not religious norms.

In my opinion there were a number of key characteristics which were the very essence of Islam. They were:-

- Belief in the unity of God: there is no God but God
- Belief in the Prophet's message: Muhammad is his messenger
- Undertaking workshop and service (the 5 Pillars)

A follower could pay lip-service to these, but unless they were followed and practised (Ihsan) they are not complete. Being pious and holy in itself is not enough.

A good Muslim practices what they preach. Islam, essentially, is about remembering God in our words, our deeds and our thoughts. The essence of Islam is God consciousness. Islam is about submitting to the will of God but for us the problem is, how do we know if what we are doing does constitute submission? How do we know if we are following the 'straight path'? The real issue is one of interpretation, interpretation of the Quran and of the Sunnah. All religions 'suffer' from differing and sometimes conflicting interpretations. Islam is not alone in this. There are so many different views and beliefs, stemming from a central core. Some, so-called Muslims have hijacked Islam for their own ends. This has happened not just with our suicide bombers recently but is a feature of Islam throughout its history. The same, of course, is true with Christianity.

There are many 'types' of Islam: political, sectarian, religious, cultural and spiritual. Which one(s) are right? Which one do **you** choose? In my submission, there is something unique about being a British Muslim compared to say a French Muslim or a Pakistani Muslim. In Britain, you can be for example, a British Muslim or Kashmiri, of Pakistani heritage, of Bengali heritage. You can speak English and Panjabi and Bengali. It is because, here in Britain, we

believe in the concept of what is now called, 'multiple identities,' that is within British law you can be British, be proud of your ancestral heritage and of your faith. These things are **not** exclusive. You, as citizens of Britain, as English residents, are here and now. The Prophet (PBUH) stressed that, providing it did not conflict with your faith practices, Muslims who were not living in Islamic countries, **should** participate fully in the civic duties of that country, **should** obey the law and be, what we now call, active citizens. The debate about Islam and democracy and whether the two are compatible was a live one. The key, for us as British Muslims, was that we must engage in this debate. We must participate in this discourse.

KEY ISSUE TWO: GENDER AND ISLAM

If there was anything which really gave ammunition to those who wanted to attack Islam as a religion that was opposed to 'modernity' it was the **perceived** position of women in Islam generally and British Muslim women in particular. One problem was that there are many misconceptions about gender and Islam. These exist both in the non-Muslim, and indeed in the Muslim world. Increasing research indicates that many of the cultures and customs ascribed to Islam are not Quranically based have more to do with the historical and cultural context from which they derived.

You will have noted the title of this key issue. It is not 'women and Islam' but 'Gender and Islam', that is because **both sexes have roles, responsibilities and rights**. Interestingly the fundamental principle of modesty applies not merely to women but also, to men, "tell the believing men to lower their eyes and be mindful of their chastity: this will make for greater purity for them... and tell the believing women to lower their eyes and to be mindful of their chastity" (24.30.31). Further, one key Quranic principle, is that of equality between the sexes. The Prophet (PBUH) enjoined that women should have equality of education and of pay. Most importantly of all, there should be spiritual equality. Some of the Prophet's (PBUH) wives taught and interpreted the Quran after his death. Some were actively involved in 'Tafsir', the science of Quranic interpretation.

It appears that the veil itself was only worn by the wives in Medina because the Prophet's (PBUH) house was open to all and sundry and there was no privacy. To some it is now a symbol of female oppression. To others, it is worn with pride as a symbol of faith. It became commonplace many years after the death of the prophet (PBUH). This is a very live and contentious debate. What is very clear, however, is that Islam prohibits 'forced' marriage. Although men have the prime financial responsibility, even the Prophet (PBUH) helped in the home and washed and mended his own clothes.

KEY ISSUE THREE: RACISM AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

This, in itself, is a massive subject. The term, 'Islamophobia', is relatively recent and is taken to mean a morbid fear of Muslims. It might be a new term, but it is hardly a new phenomenon. Western history is replete with examples of anti-Islamic sentiment. But why is it so prevalent now? We have considerable evidence to demonstrate that since 9/11, throughout Europe, there has been a rise in attacks on Muslims, for nothing more than being Muslims. What can Muslims do to counter this? What responsibility have we got?

KEY ISSUE FOUR: EDUCATION AND ISLAM

There are two major educational areas that young Muslims need to be discussing. The first is mainstream education that is your compulsory schooling whether it is state or privately funded. The second is madrassahs/mosque schools. Some British Islamic groups do very well academically. Others, especially Pakistani and Bangladeshi heritage, and especially boys are underachieving. Some ethnic groups place enormous value on education; others do not. Personally I fail to understand this especially as the Prophet (PBUH) was so **explicit** in encouraging education.

- ✓ “Seeking knowledge is compulsory for Muslims, man and woman” (Hadith)
- ✓ “Seek knowledge, even unto China” (Hadith)
- ✓ “O my Lord, increase me in my knowledge”, was reported to have been the Prophet’s (PBUH) favourite supplication.

For us, as Muslims, education is crucial. The principles of Western education are very similar to those of Islam in that they both stress the spiritual and moral aspects. The major difference is that the purpose of education for Muslims relates to the remembrance of God, to living a just life. The key question is to ask if you see Islamic values reflected in your school curriculum.

The questions that madrassahs need to ask are different. Obviously, if they are doing their job properly, everything they do should be about transmitting Islamic values and remembering God. But the issue for you as young Muslims, and for the madrassahs as educators, relates both to what you learn and how you are taught. In so many there appears to be little discussion and discourse. One of the great characteristics of Islamic civilisation was that people debated, asked key questions, and developed incredible scholarship. The question for us now is where is the modern Islamic scholarship? Where are the scholars in the West who are helping us come to terms, embrace and help fashion the modern world in which we live?

KEY ISSUE FIVE: MEDIA/STEREOTYPE

When did you last remember a good news story about Muslims? Recently, working with your facilitators, we asked ourselves that question. With the exception of Amir Khan, the Olympic boxer, we could not think of one. If you ask the opposite question about bad news stories, you hardly have enough time to list them all. Sadly this is not new. The late Edward Said’s book, ‘Covering Islam’, provides a damning indictment of how Western journalism portrays Islam. There is a long history of stereotyping of Muslims which prevails up until today, so much so that many contemporary Muslims have called for a Prime Ministerial audit to monitor the coverage of Muslims.

KEY ISSUE SIX: TERRORISM

“We are at war and I am a soldier”
(Mohammed Sidique Khan – 2005, one of London bombers)

Khan justified his actions in the London bombings by declaring that: “our words are dead until we give them life with our blood, and that the ummah is under attack”. In his view, all of us, you and I as citizens of a democracy bear responsibility and, therefore, can be legitimately attacked.

Do you understand (not sympathise) with this position at all?
Is Terrorism/suicide bombings justified anywhere in the world?

For most Muslims throughout the world, this view of Islam does not correspond with our perception of Islam. For us it is a frightening distortion of God's word. There are so many Quranic passages that refute the idea that Islam can be imposed on the unwilling. To quote five of the most famous:

“If your Lord had willed, all the people on the earth would have believed”

“Do you think you can force people to be believers?”
(10:99)

“So remind them! You are only a reminder. You are not in control of them”
(88: 21022)

“I do not worship what you worship, and you do not worship what I worship.
Nor will I worship what you worship, nor will you worship what I worship.
You have your religion, and I have my religion”
(109: 2-6)

“Let there be no compulsion in religion. Truth stands out clearly from falsehood”
(2:256)

In as much as it is clear that Islam must not be imposed by force, it is equally clear that taking one own's life, whatever the course, is forbidden, and is haram.

“Man is forbidden from taking his own life for it is Allah's Gift and Trust to him. He is forbidden from abusing it for it does not belong to him but belongs to the One Who gave it.” Thus, committing suicide is a great sin in Islam. Almighty Allah states this idea when he says: “Nor kill (or destroy) yourselves, for verily Allah hath been to you Ever-Merciful!” (4:29)

Many authentic hadiths strongly warned against and forbade man from taking his own life.

“And whoever kills himself with an iron weapon, then the iron weapon will remain in his hand, and he will continuously stab himself in his belly with it in the Fire of Hell eternally, forever and ever.” (Reported by al-Bukhaaree, no. 5778 and Muslim, no. 109, in the Book of Eemaan).

What is then that causes some Muslims to ignore these clear Quranic injunctions and persuade themselves that suicide bombings are a manifestation of God's will. In short, what are the causes of so-called 'Islamic' terrorism? In many ways they are no different from the underlying act of many acts of terror. Generally they are grounded in a sense of powerlessness, a sense that overwhelming military odds can only be countered by acts of individual 'terror' which will persuade the oppressor to leave. This is true in countries like Palestine, Chechnya, Iraq and Afghanistan. Add to this 'political' Islam which blames the West for its decline and wants to rid the Muslim world of the Western elements and influence. Islam is unique in its sense of overarching community (the ummah) which feels pain and suffering is one part of the world as acutely as if it were here and now. Terror can be seen as a global response, fuelled by internet coverage and other forms of worldwide communication.

The point is that we as Muslims should not ignore global issues, but rather what should be the nature of our response to them. Whatever we do, must be grounded in Quranic reality.

KEY ISSUE SEVEN: YOU AS ACTIVE CITIZENS

It is now commonplace to encourage people to become active citizens. So much government thinking is now centred upon citizenship, upon involving and consulting you in all matters that affect your life. It is clear from the Quran that you are 'enjoined' (encouraged) to:-

- ✓ Take an active part
- ✓ Do good works
- ✓ Encourage religious tolerance
- ✓ Engage in healthy dialogue between religious groups

TOWARDS AN ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF THE HEART

Finally, why have I chosen this rather strange title, 'Towards an Islamic Republic of the Heart?' I pondered for some time as to what I might call it. It came to me on holiday in the Islamic Republic of the Maldives. I had been talking to several young Maldivian Muslims about the issues they faced. Perhaps, not surprisingly, they were very similar to the issues faced by young Muslims in Britain. They were critical of the way in which Islam was taught. They learnt predominantly by rote, were not encouraged to talk about the meaning of the texts, especially as they applied to the modern globalized world in which they lived. You went straight to prison for drinking alcohol, but not for taking drugs. They were devout Muslims but did not feel prepared for the world in which they found themselves.

So, why Islamic? That's easy. The values of remembering God in all you do and think are constant and universal. As Muslims the Quran is our clear guide. Why Republic? Republic implies acting as a citizen, doing your civic duty, following your conscience within the law, practising your faith freely in our multicultural society. Why the heart? The heart is the key symbol for the love of God, for divine remembrance that is fundamental to Islam. In that sense it does not matter where you are, which country or whether it is an Islamic or non-Islamic. You, in Britain, here and now can be a good Muslim.

In spite of Islamophobia and other forms of racism, Britain is a country in which we can worship freely and with pride. It is my belief, if ever there a country which allows Muslims to forge a unique identity, one that retains the integrity of Islamic and Western values, it is here. Conferences like this which offer space and time to discuss our faith in action, will help forge a unique British Muslim identity which combines, builds upon and enhances all the great traditions we are heir to.

The final words, of course, must rest with the Prophet (PBUH). Much has been made of the first multicultural, multifaith constitution in history, established by the Prophet in Medina. Although it is not a fully developed political system it does set the values, the rights and responsibilities for all those (Muslims and non-Muslims) living there at the time. I end with a brief excerpt from the Prophet's last sermon. If you take nothing from this conference but follow the precepts outlined here, I will count the day a real success.

The Prophet's last sermon

'People, verily your Lord and Sustainer is one and your ancestor is one. All of you descend from Adam and Adam was made of earth. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab nor for a non-Arab over an Arab; neither a white man over a black man nor a black man over a white man except the superiority gained through God consciousness. Indeed the noblest of you is the one who is most deeply conscious of God.'

(From the farewell sermon of the noble Prophet, delivered in Arafat and Mina in the month of Dhu-L-Hijjah 10 AH/630 CE)

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