Being Human: Moving beyond Identity Politics

Dilwar Hussain advocates a reform and renewal of Islam, re-reading the scriptures, emphasising modern social ethics and giving greater prominence to reason.

In this article a contextual approach, bringing together theology and sociology, is used to argue for more rooted and 'British' expressions of Islam. Interpreted and lived religion is viewed as a social construct, as much as it may help to understand the universe and its mysteries, and as much as at the core of that worldview a belief in the divine may well be an important aspect of faith for some.

Despite the positive contributions that Muslims have made and continue to make to Britain – think of the soldiers in both WW1 and WW2, doctors and nurses in the NHS, local shopkeepers, taxi drivers, curry house owners, etc. – in the current debate around Islam it is difficult to ignore the significant strains in relations between British Muslims and their neighbours that have emerged over the years. This is not least because of terrorism, but also a negative climate of opinion around migration, as well as anti-Muslim sentiment.

At times a binary vision of 'us' and 'them', separating out 'Muslims' and 'non-Muslims' emerges, articulated by Muslim spokespersons as well as actors in the wider public debate, and this plays out in the media and political discourse. What resources can be used to advance a more inclusive, human and pluralistic way of thinking about Islam in Britain, a British Islam?

Challenges

To understand the challenge we face in doing this, we need to appreciate the defensive nature of some current Muslim discourses. Coming out of colonial rule (and reeling from the loss of the Ottoman Empire), many Muslim collective struggles of the mid-late 20th century, whilst emphasising national independence, were laced with anti-Western sentiment (because of their opposition to colonial rule). The development of new discourses and adaptation to the new

environment has been a slow process, and sometimes even a regressive process, with the politics of identity becoming rife in the second generation.

Given the times we live in, it is worth saying a little about the more extreme trend, although this is not the focus in this article. The Khawarij were an early extreme sect that emerged in the 7th century, soon after the death of Muhammad. They adopted the slogan 'no judgement except God's judgement' and declared all the rulers of their day to be outside the pale of Islam (*kuffar*). They also believed they had the duty to remove these rulers by force if necessary.

In modern times such groups have re-emerged and have argued that Muslims and non-Muslims should not mix, or that democracy cannot be reconciled with Islam, and that a violent clash between Islam and the West is inevitable. The Jihad movements of Egypt, for example, developed a systematic theology in the 1960s around the use of violence. Ayman Zawahiri (who later become a key figure in al-Qaida) emerged out of this context. In Saudi Arabia the traditionally apolitical thought of Salafism, which already had the hallmarks of conservative literalism, puritanism and elements of *takfir*, experienced a split between those that supported the regime and those who became increasingly critical of it (some arguing for a revolutionary change). Some of these, including Osama bin Laden, took on a more aggressive *jihadist* dimension.

Aside from those often classified as politically extreme, a number of movements and networks (often apolitical) also operate in a climate that would be regarded as extreme along socially conservative lines – having attitudes towards gender equality or sexual orientation that may seem out of place in modern Britain (and of course other religious traditions may share some of these strands). Even some Sufis, often seen to

represent the more esoteric and spiritual dimension of Islam, have fallen in with extremism. Take for example the 500 or so Pakistani Ulama (scholars) who in 2011 praised Mumtaz Qadri for the assassination of Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab, for opposing Pakistan's blasphemy laws.

The British Muslim scene has been subject to all the waves of thought from the shores of the Muslim world, as summarised above. While much of this has been positive and healthy, some have emphasised separation, isolation and a distinct form of 'Muslim politics' or a guarded 'Muslim identity'. The Casey Review on integration (Casey, 2016) found that 55% of the general public agree that there is a fundamental clash between Islam and the values of British society and 46% of British Muslims feel that being a Muslim in Britain is difficult due to prejudice against Islam. At the same time the Citizenship Survey of 2007 offered hope, showing that Muslims score highly in their sense of belonging to the UK. Results of those responding 'Fairly strongly' and 'Very strongly' (to the question 'How strongly do you belong to Britain?') were quite similarly high across the board – Sikhs: 93%, Hindus: 89%, Muslims: 88%, Christians: 86% and Jews: 81%.

Beyond 'us and them'

Looking at the emergence of Islam, one can see that Muhammad didn't isolate himself from the people around him. He was seen as an important, trusted member of his society. The verse of the *Qur'an*: 'The food of the people of the Book is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them' (*Qur'an,* 5:5) shows that the world-view of the early Muslim community was not one of separation but was very relaxed about social and cultural integration.

We can also find many examples of how Muhammad himself benefited from the support of other people, or was prepared to work with them, regardless of their religious or moral backgrounds. When the small band of his followers in Makkah faced severe treatment at the hands of the Quraish, it was to the Christian Negus of Abyssinia, Ashama bin Abjar, that the Prophet sent those who were able to leave. It was Waraqah ibn Naufal, a Christian monk and
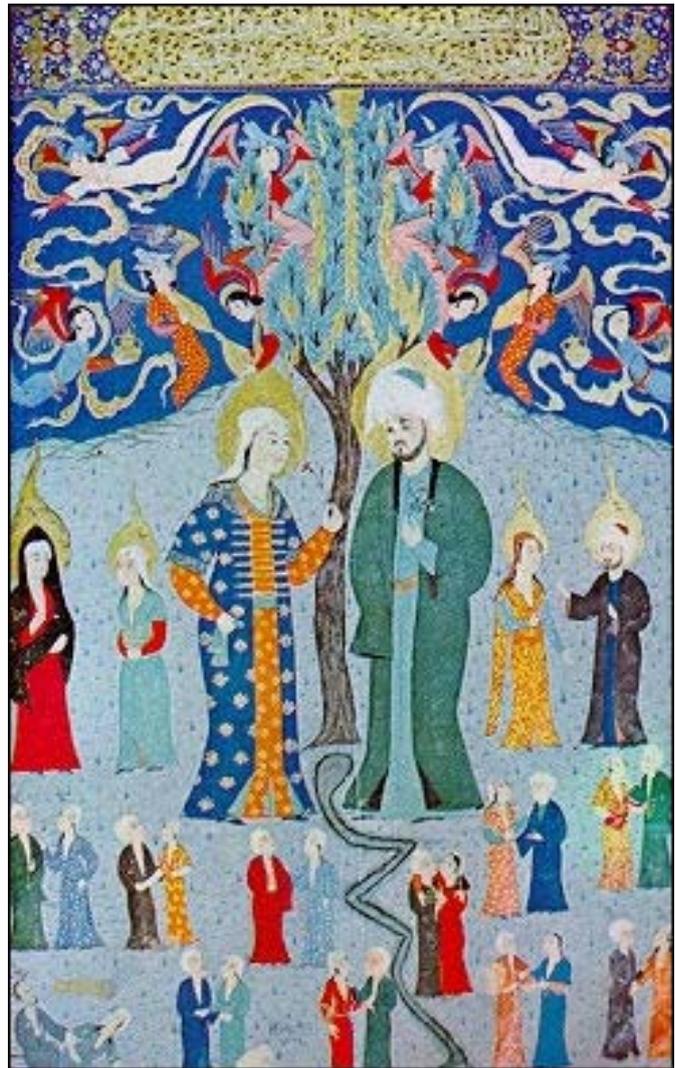
Adam and Eve:
16th century Zubdat-al Tawarh manuscript in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul,

cousin of Khadija (wife of Muhammad), who first explained the nature of revelation to them both, effectively becoming the first to practise exegesis (*tafsir*) of the *Qur'an.* One could argue that without such intimate trust, support and collaboration, Islam would never have survived as a religion.

A close look at the teachings of Islam reveal that the normative basis of human relations is meant to be about peace, co-operation and mutual learning: 'O people, we have created you from male and female and made you nations and tribes that you may come to know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. Indeed, God is Knowing and Aware' (*Qur'an,* 49:13). Yet it is clear that, for the reasons mentioned above, some Muslim discourses are in a very different place today.

The above resources are powerful to religiously conscious Muslims and they take the discussion in the right direction. But in my view there is a need to go further. And the reason for this is that solutions to the challenges of our time need to grapple not only with the mechanics of how things can be facilitated and done, but with the internal value base and framework of thought that has evolved.

Let us look at the issue of gender equality as an example. Over the last 10 or 15 years, a typical Muslim discourse has claimed that when you go back to the foundations of Islam you can find references that are emancipatory of women. Taking that point of view, some have argued that Islam has always had a positive approach towards gender equality, that the problem is cultural aberration or misinterpretation. Hence, once we are able to move away from traditional Muslim cultures, the problems will be resolved. I can understand the appeal of that at some level, but it is not enough.

By following that through one may achieve some results, but not resolve all the issues and difficulties. There are, for example, passages in the *Qur'an* that refer to differential inheritance for men and women, permission for polygamy and domestic violence (albeit in extreme and limited situations). These are in the text and a traditional *fiqh* approach cannot simply wish them away.

We need to remind ourselves that the corpus of *fiqh,* that developed around many different scholars, recorded in books over centuries, is essentially a human construct. It is the application of the human mind to what Muslims consider to be divine wisdom, to interpret and elaborate answers for a given human context. The outcome has to be human. This means that not only are laws allowed to change with time and place, they must. One cannot use generic ideas and concepts to create systems and laws that are designed to be eternal. For example, when it comes to the idea of 'justice' – the *Qur'an* talks generally about the concept and appeals to the human yearning for justice. It doesn't create an elaborate legal construct around the notion of justice. It leaves human beings to do that (in an evolving way) and reminds us that God has given us a mind, so that we can find our own solutions.

Looking ahead: new vistas

An interesting approach to circumvent this is found in the works of a range of different thinkers who, over the last century, have been at pains to emphasise the *tawhidic* integrity of the *Qur'an* – i.e. that the *Qur'an* must be read as a whole for it to be really understood, and a piecemeal approach that uses a single verse (or even a small cluster of verses) to derive a law departs from the ethos of the tradition. Examples of such individuals include Hamiduddin Farahi (d. 1930), Nasr Abu Zayd (d. 2010), Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) and Amina Wadud.

Rahman presented a particularly interesting tool for deriving the ethical principles that one should work with. His double movement theory of hermeneutics involves looking at the text to take into account the social specificities of the time of early Islam and to extract general ethical principles. One can then apply the general principles to a given situation today, again taking into account the social conditions of our time, to reach new specific responses. This is a way of bridging the contextual distance between 'then' and 'now'. Imam al-Shafi (d. 820), the great jurist accredited with the early codification of legal principles in Sunni Islam, famously felt the need to re-write sections of his *fiqh* works when he travelled from Iraq to Egypt. This is because a key principle in *fiqh* states that the '*fatwa* changes depending on the time and place'.

An important arena of development amongst reformers is the growing body of Islamic feminist critique of patriarchy in Muslim history. Scholars such as Riffat Hassan, Fatima Mernissi (1992), Amina Wadud (1999), Mir-Hosseini (2000) and Asma Barlas (2002), have argued for a re-reading of Islamic sources to create a more equal understanding of gender roles in Islam. Wadud argues that while Muslims have conventionally rejected priesthood, in the name of eradicating any barriers between humanity and God, the default position is that men have often become an intermediary between God and women. It is only by rebalancing this relationship so that men and women have equal access to God, she argues, can a true and deep sense of *tauhid* (monotheism) be practised.

Where traditional thinkers see mainly the mandates and limits set by the text, reformist

Muslim women hold hands on Westminster Bridge to protest against the Muslim terror attack and remember the victims.
Photo: *Independent* 26th March 2017

thinkers tend to see the text as indicating a direction of travel that is to be unpacked, honed and developed by every generation in an exciting project of discovery. Abdolkarim Soroush or Abdullahi an-Naim, for example, argue that the Human Rights paradigm represents a well of human wisdom that the Sharia needs to take into consideration if it is to speak seriously to the human condition of our time.

A contextual approach to Islam in the West would build a stronger synergy with the norms of a Western environment, while at the same time critiquing a universalism that creates a homo-genised brand of literal and 'true' Islam that aims to stand above cultural contexts. Religion cannot be observed as an abstract set of values devoid of location and lived culture; it is necessarily practised and given life through a cultural prism. The lived religion of Islam has always existed as an interpreted phenomenon (rather than in its abstract, essential form). An extreme neglect of local customs, cultures and traditions (often due to a stream of foreign funding in the modern

British setting) can lead to a sterile and globalised 'fast-food' brand of religion that is neither taste-ful nor nourishing for the soul.

I like to think of the context at two distinct levels: the deep context – the history and philosophy that operates within any given society – and the everyday context, the lived culture, the things that make each country or nation subtly different from others.

Muslims once drew upon the heritage of Greek philosophers, they learnt from Byzantium, China, India and Persia and this thirst for knowledge allowed early Muslim culture to blossom into a world civilisation that gave humanity so much in mathematics, philosophy, science and other branches of knowledge. Even as far as England, the impact of Arabic numerals and words such as sugar, cotton, canon and alcohol (taken from Arabic) persist. So if we have learnt in the past, why not now? Why not draw upon the European heritage of Descartes, Locke, Kant, or the more recent philosophers of our age? It is only when we draw deeply from the

intellectual heritage of our context that we can allow Islam to grow an indigenous flavour.

A British Islam cannot be a 'government controlled Islam', as the development of a wholesome citizen involves the ability to hold power accountable, and in a secular society the boundary between state and religion should be respected. Nor is it just a liberal vision of Islam either. For example, Muslims could just as easily draw upon Strauss or MacIntyre to influence a conservative tradition, as they could draw upon Locke or Rawls for a more liberal one.

Either way, one would hope that Muslims can quickly begin to see beyond their own needs, concerns and plight to look for the common good. We were not placed on this Earth to merely look after ourselves. Even in the face of persecution and enmity, the task is to be of benefit to people around us; to bring peace to others, not hatred and anger, and definitely not violence. The *Qur'an* declares, '…let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice. Be just: that is closest to piety…' (*Qur'an*, 5:8). Muhammad also taught, 'Shall I tell you of something that is better than fasting, prayer and charity? It is mending discord between people. Beware of hatred – it strips you of your religion.'

Conclusion

A post-colonial suspicion of the West along with religious puritanism has meant that a minority of Muslims' attitudes towards social engagement and even civic participation has been coloured by a sense of 'otherness' aimed at the very place they have made their homes. Along with anti-Muslim prejudice and anti-immigrant sentiment, again a minority phenomenon, this cocktail breeds narratives of separation and alienation that have the potential to exacerbate a binary division of 'us and them'. But this is only one possible future and there are ways of diffusing these narratives and taking different paths.

One such path, when looking at Islamic thought, is to dig deep into Muslim tradition and find inclusive and open resources that are already present and well acknowledged. They can facilitate and foster an attitude of co-operation and co-existence that, at a pragmatic level can be very important, and can lead to a common (albeit weak) sense of shared belonging and values and thus an aspiration for the common good.

However, a much deeper engagement with the social, cultural and intellectual fabric of society is also possible. By adopting an approach of reform and renewal that can read the scripture in a more holistic yet contextually rooted manner, emphasising modern social ethics and cultural norms and giving greater prominence to reason, more organic interpretations can evolve that may well resonate more deeply with the needs of Muslim Britons.

Other pathways may well be available, but whichever is chosen, there is a need to leave behind the divisive discourses that split British citizens into opposite camps. The notions of 'us and them' are not defined by faith (or ethnicity) any longer. If any binary division were to exist, it would be about those who want us to live in perpetual conflict, animosity, mistrust and hatred; and those who want to build a healthy, integrated society, based on the values we share as human beings, in pursuit of a common good.

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