

**MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE  
IN  
THE UNITED KINGDOM  
CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY**

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## **Introduction**

The last time I was in this hall was in the winter of 1987. In the corner, there on my left I met the former Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Basil Hume. During our informal conversation he said: “your work demands much determination”. Those words have remained impressed in my mind since then. Events in the modern world highlight the visions of Islam as a world religion that “threatens” contemporary civilisations and causes great fear mainly because of its “fundamentalism”. This is a term, which I personally do not like very much, for I find it unclear, if not confusing. The word “fundamentalism” is like a box containing different things, which people put in. They vary from place to place and differ according to peoples’ ideas. The tragic events of September the 11<sup>th</sup> have highlighted the perception of Islam as a potential threat to world peace. Terms like culture, religion and civilisation have become part of the vocabulary used in the media. Religious revival, which has marked the end of the millennium, continues to influence many parts of the world.

It is often forgotten that for millions of people in the world today Islam means religion and faith. For Muslims Islam embodies a culture and a way of life. In approaching the study of Muslim-Christian relations and Muslim societies today there is, at least in myself, a sense of inadequacy seeing the milestones of Islamic history and the richness of Muslim tradition. Study and research in the field of Islamic studies and Muslim-Christian dialogue have prompted me to look into two different directions. These can be summarised in two key words: **complexity / complexities** and **identity / identities**.

## **COMPLEXITY- COMPLEXITIES**

Muslim societies show diversity at different levels: culture, race, language, ethnicity. These concepts are by themselves complex to understand in every local situation in the UK and difficult to document them in a clear way. There is no doubt that, historically speaking, the Arabs were the principal actors in the beginnings of Islam. It was among them that Islam was born, develop and spread further a field. Therefore, it was natural that the Arabs played a pivotal role in shaping the destiny and history of Islam. Religiously, culturally and emotionally the Arabs moulded Islam and influenced its development. Other peoples and populations came to join the “House of Islam” in the course of history bringing new elements and reinvigorating with other traditions. The Muslim community today is made up of Arabs and Africans, Asians and Europeans, North Americans, Australians and South Americans. Some

three hundreds years ago the East India Company recruited seamen from the lands of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen, India and Bengal. These Muslim workers were known as “lascars”, who established themselves in towns of Great Britain, London being a favourite place. The migration factor began to bring the culture and civilisation of Islam to the shores of the British Isles. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 favoured the arrival of many Muslims who settled down in Liverpool, Cardiff, London and in other parts of the country. There were also converts to Islam coming from a Christian background. William Henry Quilliam, a lawyer by profession, became a Muslim in 1887 after spending time in North Africa. He edited the weekly journal *The Crescent* between 1893 and 1908 and was known to Muslims as Sheikh Abdullah Quilliam. Another influential convert was Marmaduke Pickthall, who after his conversion to Islam in 1917, became a devout Muslim and translated the Qur’ân into English. He is best known as a translator, but he was also a novelist. In fact he had written six novels set Egypt, Palestine, Yemen and Syria.

A prominent Muslim was the imam of Cardiff, Sheikh al-Hakimi who died in 1934. This is an important date in Muslim history. It was the year when the first English translation of the Qur’ân by a Muslim translator was published. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, a Pakistani Muslim scholar, had completed the translation of Islam’s sacred book with a long commentary and written the preface on April the 4<sup>th</sup> 1934. This was a significant achievement for a Muslim, whose native language was not Arabic, but who nonetheless had mastered the language of the Qur’ân. The East London Mosque Trust was established in 1941 and converted three buildings in Commercial Road into the first mosque in the capital. At the beginning of the 1980s the East London Mosque was moved to its present location in Whitechapel Road. The building of other mosques was to follow in Bradford, Birmingham, Glasgow, London and Manchester. The Muslim communities began to develop their own cultural and religious identities, adapting ethnic traditions, borrowing foreign customs, integrating local elements. Constant interaction and continuous exposure to a country with a historical Christian population will develop into a key aspect of Muslim-Christian relations in the United Kingdom. Religious identities will be constructed around the idea of “being Muslim and being also part of the UK”. Such a historical challenge will constitute a driving force in community and group relations.

The 1950s knew the migration of Muslims on a greater scale. Migration was encouraged on account of the shortage of labour in the textile and steel industries. Migrant workers came mainly from India and Pakistan. The 1970s knew a different type of migration, that of Middle East, North Africa and Turkey. With the arrival of new Muslim immigrants from other parts of the Islamic world the face of Muslim communities in Britain begins to change. There are those who are Muslims and citizens and those who are Muslims and have the status of immigrants. This fact has brought in another complex and delicate issue, that of citizenship and nationality. The movements and migrations of peoples, planned or forced, have brought Muslims into areas, where Muslims were a minority. This is the case of the United Kingdom and Europe. Regarding the latter there is a divergence of opinions as to where do we put

the frontiers and boundaries of European nations. Muslims living in Europe have arrived at different historical periods (1), they come from different countries (2) and they represent a variety of ways of living Islam (3). There are *Sunni* Muslims from Egypt and Malaysia, there are *Shi'a* from Iran and Tanzania, there are *Ahmadiyya* from Pakistan and Nigeria, there are Muslims from the Islamic Brotherhoods: *Murids* from the Senegal, *Naqshabadi* from Bangladesh. There are Muslims from Afghanistan and Morocco, from Zanzibar and Turkey, from the Middle East and Iraq, from the Gulf countries and from Indonesia. Moreover, we have also to take into account the number of new arrivals in the "House of Islam", known under the term of Muslim converts. On the other hand there are also those who come to the shores of the Christian faith after leaving Islam. These are also important aspects of inter-faith work and relations, that cannot be overlooked.

No one will venture into saying that Muslims from Turkey, Mali and Lebanon can be considered at the same level. To begin with each group represents noticeable differences in origin, tradition and language. They probably use a European language to communicate among themselves: German?, French?, English?. Their countries of origin, even if they are of the third generation, have certainly shaped them via family and kinship relations. Facilities in travel and communication have made possible frequent trips to the motherland. But many Muslims in the United Kingdom have never been to the homeland of their fathers. They have seen the name of "their country" on a world map and will never go to live there. In fact, Muslims of the second and third generation were born in this country and firmly believe it is also their country. In spite of all this and the fact that they are Muslims living in Europe, the moment something happens in "their country" there is an immediate reaction. It cannot be otherwise, as the saying goes: "blood is stronger than religion". Concepts such as European integration, European culture, Western civilisation, European Islam, need careful examination and continuous assessment in the light of other religions, other cultures, other civilisations, other languages actively present in Europe.

This creates the problem of rights and duties of minorities. It is not easy to strike a healthy balance between the defence of "group freedoms" and the defence of "national legislation". The complexity of the problem cannot be solved by taking refuge behind partition walls and fenced territories. Rather, it requires an acute analysis of local situations whereby viable solutions can be found beyond the nightmare of "it is not possible". It is important to remember whether or not avenues for possible solutions have been explored and tried out, or simply the problem continues to be on every agenda. Meanwhile, some people continue to think that "the United Kingdom and the rest of Europe must not become the damping ground of the new millennium". We cannot escape from the difficulties and questions arising from the presence of millions of refugees in the world. They are victims of war, injustice, poverty, violence, hatred and persecution. Migrations in recent years have caused much upheaval, especially in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. Much of the discourse of nation and nationalism revolves around the state. The human tragedies

in the Balkans show how ideological nationalism based on religious perceptions is associated with bitter and unresolved conflicts.

The Arab world shows signs of diversity and pluralism, and often fragmentation, in political systems. From the 1990s the Middle East would appear to be one of the potentially most unstable regions of the world, given the combination of political tensions, endemic violence and territorial claims. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has seen the rising of an armed confrontation in which “stones” and “missiles” will never bring about peace and stability in the region. Lasting solutions to human problems can never be wholly political. The cultural fabric, religious diversity and human justice are some of the thorny issues that can never be resolved with bombs, grenades and retaliation.

The tragedy of the Algerian “uncivil war” points to the differences in interpretation of what Islam is and what Muslim believers are expected to do. Arabic is the language of the fundamental sources of Islam: the Qur’ân and the Tradition. It is also the sacred language of Islam. But we can see that Muslims are using languages which by definition are not Islamic, such as English. The conceptual approach of “Islam and the West” does not help us to understand the problems at stake. We can ask ourselves two questions: where is Islam? and where is the West?. There is a continuous interaction between what Islam represents and what the West represents. On which side shall we put a Muslim university lecturer? Where shall we place a British Muslim born in the United Kingdom? Terms such as pluralism, diversity and differences need to be spelled out in order to understand the dynamism and development of British communities today.

The fact of “being Arab” has given Arab Muslims a position of pre-eminence in the history of Islam, although today they constitute only a minority in the world Muslim community. Systems of government vary within the Arab Islamic nations and also elsewhere among nations in Africa and Asia where Muslims are a majority. There are Muslims of African, Asian, Arab and European origin in the United Kingdom. There are profound differences, not only in customs and traditions, but also in the way Islam is seen, perceived and lived. The problem of translating Muslim legislation and interpreting Islam in religious, cultural and social terms is not solved in the same way. The defenders of an Islamic government, as the key to national politics, are faced with the waves of secularisation, modernity and technology. Muslim societies are in themselves complex and different models are on offer. The Islamic framework of government offered by the former ruthless *Taliban* in Afghanistan, the *Abu Sayaf* in the Southern Philippines or the *Pancasila* in Indonesia are very different, both in content, interpretation and objectives. Regarding Afghanistan, it must be said that there is more to that country than Bin Laden and the Taliban. We are not yet at the end of the tunnel and only history, eventually, will show many of the truths that are still masqueraded by warfare and hidden under the veil.

The history of the Middle East continues to worry world leaders. Jews, Muslims and Christians continue to carve out their own cultural and religious space. The historical claims of the three monotheistic religions in the Mediterranean area over Jerusalem as their “Holy City” creates tension, that touches the strings of economics, politics and government. The suggestion of making Jerusalem an “international city” will probably find road blocks, not only from Jews, Christians and Muslims, but also from other world leaders. Permission granted to build a mosque in front of the Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth had shown how great religious, traditional and cultural sensibilities are. Seemingly, building permission has been recently denied and the problem has been apparently solved. One point is very clear, however: on that issue we cannot divide people into those who say “yes” and those who say “no”. The question is more complex, requires a wider consensus and demands, perhaps, the voice and point of view which does not speak “politics” or “religion”. The toll of human victims and casualties in the past months has brought political leaders into a head on dramatic collision. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict cannot be solved unless leaders dare to put all the cards on the table, deal with the problems with great realism and admit that they might have committed human errors. Not doing this means to allow the whirlwind of violence destroy the human societies of the Middle East. What happens in that part of the world influences inter-faith relations everywhere else and conditions the quality of peace and understanding between Jews, Muslims and Christians.

## **IDENTITY and IDENTITIES**

The great majority of Muslims live in Africa and Asia. In the course of history Islam has interacted with local traditions and customs, seeking adaptation and often acting as the invisible glue to unite races, languages and ethnic groups. However, no matter how global and universal the vision of Islam it might be, Muslim identities are locally built and constructed. Territory and language, customs and traditions, food taboos and systems of authority are some of the areas that need close scrutiny and continuous examination in order to understand the complex issues of cultural and religious identities. Diversity and differences as much as harmony and unity interplay within the boundaries of ethnicity, language and nationality. There is no universal Muslim model, which is applicable to all Muslim societies and which can be exported, borrowed or implanted everywhere where Muslims live. Nevertheless, it is true to affirm that common elements, pertaining to creed, ritual and legislation, are found in all Muslim societies. However, the way such ingredients interact in a given society differs a great deal and constitutes a challenge for Muslims themselves. Muslims in the United Kingdom come from various origins and show different cultural and religious identities.

One of the most prominent African Muslim thinkers and writers, Sheikh Abdullah Saleh al-Farsy (1912-1982) wrote: “we should shake off the religious colonialism of the Arabs”. As a convinced Muslim, he was very much aware of the necessity of building local Muslim societies in Eastern Africa, using people’s linguistic and

cultural elements. This brings into the surface the differences in Muslim identities and the ways Muslims read and interpret Islam in their own environment and context. Cultural and religious can be borrowed, but there new elements and fresh ingredients being integrated and assimilated. This does not mean in any way that such diversity in Muslim societies has to be perceived necessarily in terms of confrontation, sectarianism or deviation from orthodoxy.

The challenge of a pluralist world in culture, in religion, in civilisation, does not come from the imaginative writings of poets and novelists. Pluralism is the greatest asset that humanity can hold today. It is embedded in the DNA of humanity. Pluralism forces individuals and societies to look for ways of respectful communication and to search for areas of collaboration. Pluralism opens the doors wide open to the exploration of other cultures, of other faiths, of other civilisations. If pluralism and diversity are taken seriously there are no magical formulas which can be applied on a world scale or imposed “in the name of religion”, usually by force, once the notion of human freedom has been banned, uprooted and discarded like a chicken bone.

In this respect we face three major challenges in the international arena: the use of force (1), the use of the media (2), the use of religion (3). The sixty-seven zones of war and conflict, identified in our planet, are in themselves an eye opener to our vision of the world. They constitute a major challenge to peace and understanding among peoples and nations. Hard realities are often disguised and hidden under unpalatable and obscure terms, such as “fundamentalism”. Leaving aside the hidden intellectual and subtle distinctions of erudite thinkers and venerable scholars, it is imperative to affirm that armed force is used in the name of religion to enslave populations, deprive populations of human dignity and cause immense hardship on innocent peoples. It is also true that under the pretext of suppressing the so-called “fundamentalism”, violent means are used to crash, persecute and annihilate the enemy, or the “bandits”, to borrow the term used in the context of the current Chechnya human disaster. World history shows that often the real motivations have to do far more with political hegemony, economic control or personal ambitions, than with questions of faith, religion and culture.

There is no doubt that prominent figures like Ayatullah Khomeini (1904-1989) in Iran or movements like *Hamas* and *Hizbullah* in the Middle East have had a global influence in the way Muslims have perceived Islam. But from there it cannot be drawn the conclusion that the model proposed by the Islamic Republic of Iran will work elsewhere. It is true to say that Muslims are challenged in their own vision of Islam by seeing a particular model of Islamic government. The model of the Islamic Republic of Iran is also a direct challenge to the way political order and religious authority interact in government and state policies. It is interesting to notice that none of the Islamic Republics of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) has copied the Iranian model as a form of viable Muslim rule in spite of the cultural, religious and historical links. Long years of

Soviet domination and repression, when any Muslim public manifestation was kept under tight control, have provoked a sentiment of refusal of any form of government imported and imposed from outside. Nonetheless, in 1992 Turkmenistan introduced the teaching of Arabic and Persian in the national programmes of education. The tragic events in Chechnya and Afghanistan, the ethnic cleansing memories of Bosnia and Kosovo, the uncertain destiny of Kurdish Muslims show how vulnerable and fragile historical, religious and cultural relations are.

The general elections in Malaysia in November 1999 saw the victory of *Parti Islam* in Kelantan and Kuala Terengganu, two of the states in the Federation. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia says that *Islam is the religion of the Federation* (3, 1), giving to the Muslim religion a pre-eminence at constitutional level in a multireligious, multicultural and multiethnic society. To this one needs to add the relationship between “belonging to the land” and “belonging elsewhere”. This is expressed in Malaysia with the term *bamaputra* (rooted in the land, ownership of, belonging to). Although physically you were born, live and die in “the land, in the country”, you are considered to be “from a different land, from another country”. The English expression “you do not belong here” encapsulates the complexities of human societies anywhere in the world. The reason is simple and straight forward: ethnically you are different, religiously probably you are also different, culturally definitely you have a different cultural outlook. To make things worse and complicated your colour scheme, your language accent and your physical features betray you as well. The so called *clash of civilisations* needs to be lowered down to the realities of local Muslim societies and put at the level of religious and cultural identities, if at all we desire to deal in a serious way with the problems of religious pluralism (1), cultural diversity (2) and linguistic differences (3). These challenges cannot be avoided and need to be addressed in the years to come.

Interreligious dialogue is not a side road in the life of British society, but rather part and parcel of communities bound by religious faith and cultural tradition. Pluralism and diversity constitute the powerful ingredients that help continuous social interaction and foster greater sense of religious identities. Interreligious dialogue does not aim at diluting members of different religions into one single community. It rather seeks at finding ways of understanding each other’s faith tradition and at discovering the avenues of greater collaboration. Interreligious dialogue is the peace growth engine in a world torn apart by disgraceful rivalries in the name of religion and destroyed by injustice in the name of progress. The path of interreligious dialogue is the arena of mutual emulation and interactive co-operation to create a better future and leave a legacy of freedom and civility for the future generations. Interreligious dialogue can heal the deep wounds caused by wars, hatred and violence. These throw brother against brother, bringing shame and hardship to entire populations. Interreligious dialogue is not the choice of some and the hobby of others. It is a vital necessity at the crossroads of this new millennium.