

Social Policy, Cultural Integration and Faith: A Muslim Reflection

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This article is a reflection on some of the discussions around faith and public life, within the context of Muslim communities and their interaction with public policy. It looks at the gap between popular debates on Muslims and the actual lived socio-economic reality of most people of Muslim background, and then goes on to look at aspects of identity formation and Muslim identity politics in the UK. It also considers the idea of integration and looks briefly at emerging Islamic discourses that are grappling with some of the challenges presented by modern British society. Finally, the article explores the role of faith in the public sphere and if it can help to build social capital and play a role in ideas such as the Big Society. The article concludes by emphasising the need to move beyond identity politics and communitarianism and asks where the real divides in society are – between religious and ideological groups or within them?

Keywords: Integration, faith, public sphere, social policy, Big Society, Islam, Muslim.

Introduction

With all the academic research that has taken place on Muslims, and British Muslims in particular, over the last ten years there still appears to be a dearth of focused material when it comes to analysis of the social policy concerns that Muslim communities often face. The most common angles of research seem to be on the subjects of Islamophobia, media representation, identity and integration, and, of course, preventing extremism. The latter has created a particularly problematic prism for studies of Muslim communities. However, a recent report on Muslims in Leicester (Hussain *et al.*, 2010) shows that for Muslim (subjects of study) citizens themselves, the socio-economic challenges seem to be much broader. The report looked at policing, health, citizenship, housing, as well as the topics above and could have been cast even wider.

This is not to say that policy concerns should always be expressed in a specifically religious framing, far from it. But clearly there are some areas where a religious framing is unavoidable, even if superficially. For example, a religious breakdown of the UK prison population shows that Muslims represent over 12 per cent of all prisoners – a staggering number considering they constitute only around 3 per cent of British society.

This mismatch between the types of policy concerns mentioned above and the apparent public debate is a gulf that not only exists in wider society but even amongst Muslim non-government organisations (NGOs). Very few Muslim organisations in the national arena seem to seriously discuss, or campaign about, the pressing issues of poverty, inequality, health and other such socio-economic indicators in which Muslim

communities often appear as serious underperformers – as evidenced by data from, *inter alia*, the 2001 Census. On the contrary, the public discourse has traditionally been dominated by topics such as terrorism and reactions against anti-terror measures, discrimination, foreign policy concerns and media representation.

However, there are signs of some change as emerging clusters of grassroots organisations are trying to grapple with their realities, some even now confronting some of the thornier subjects of debate, such as domestic violence, forced marriage or the lack of access that women may have to many mosques. Neither these subjects, nor the social policy ones mentioned above, are specifically ‘Islamic’ concerns *per se*, but they do affect significant numbers of Muslims. It could be argued that such issues have much more to do with factors such as class, race, education and economics than they do with religion. The experience of recent migration and settlement, and the origination of many of those migrants from quite impoverished, rural locations in South Asia are factors that cannot be forgotten when we think of socio-economic challenges, but also social attitudes to marriage, kinship and the family. However, this article deliberately looks at some of the overlaps between faith and public policy as Muslim policy debates are often framed in that way, and especially as there is a growing interest in the role that faith could potentially play in social policy; examines notions of Muslim identity politics, integration and emerging Islamic discourses; and touches on notions of social capital and the role of faith in the public arena, including some reflections on the ‘Big Society’.

British Muslims and the public policy context

Looking at the Muslim community must be quite a perplexing task from the outside: a very diverse community of communities, of various ethnic groups, of various different first languages – very traditional and conservative in many senses and yet grappling with modernity, and the modern world, as most ‘religious’ people are. We can see the results of that as a tension in the discourses of the first generation who were migrants, and the second generation who began to see Britain as their home, and many in the third, and now fourth, generations who think that the question of where they belong is itself rather patronising (Ahmed, 2009). Not only do they now identify as British, but also increasingly young Muslims in England see themselves as English (catching up with their co-religionists in Scotland and Wales, who have long identified with their local, ‘national’ identities).

The British Muslim experience has points of intersection with experiences of other ethnic and religious minorities in British society, be they Jewish, Irish, African-Caribbean, Indian or Polish communities. Yet each of these communities also has its unique and distinctive experiences rooted in history and culture. For Muslims, the way in which globalisation has impacted upon Muslim communities in the diaspora, the influence of the specific post-colonial discourses of the Muslim world and more recently the impact of the evolving political climate post 9/11 create a specific set of experiences.

On the external level, events such as the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the *Satanic Verses* affair in the 1980s, and later 9/11 and 7/7, meant that the public limelight was intensely on the religious dimension of Muslims’ identity. In particular, the evolving identity politics over the last three decades in Britain has meant that Muslims themselves emphasised their religious identity in order both to be recognised as having distinct policy needs (and common rights) while falling through the cracks of old race relations legislation which failed to adequately recognise, and therefore deal with, the growing religiously motivated

hatred against them. But there was also an attempt to transcend ethnic, tribal and sectarian differences at a grassroots level through emphasising a more common British (Muslim) identity.

The religious label accorded to Muslim citizens does now appear to have some problematic dimensions. Increasingly Muslim identity is viewed as reified and exaggerated. A criminal is now a 'Muslim thief', the local GP is a 'Muslim doctor', social policy concerns are 'Muslim concerns', etc. The trouble with this is twofold: that Muslims cannot be seen simply as human beings, they have to be perceived mainly through a religious prism; and, secondly – perhaps more problematic – the identity created is rooted in the politics of defiance, often shaped by major global upheavals. This can all be very confusing: should we refer to Muslims, Asians, Pakistanis, British citizens or a mixture of the above? Eventually, perhaps the label will just be British (or English, Scottish, Welsh) citizens.

This is not to suggest that Muslims disappear into a secular void, rather that Islam should no longer be an exotic preoccupation (see Said, 1978, for example); it should become almost banal and ordinary, normal and normalised. We wouldn't feel the need always to call, say, Tony Blair or Gordon Brown former 'Christian Prime Ministers', even though Christianity is evidently important to both of them. It is a question of how we choose to define people publicly, and giving them a one-dimensional description, however important, undervalues the complexity of that person.

While the more visible public policy campaigns launched by Muslim communities may have begun with the *Satanic Verses*¹ in 1988, it was not until the election of New Labour in 1997 that significant strides were made in engaging Muslim communities (and faith communities more generally) in specific social policy matters. Funding of Muslim schools, opening up access to Whitehall (both in terms of government advisors as well as community engagement), placing people of Muslim background into the House of Lords, the insertion of the religious affiliation question into the 2001 Census and important developments in equalities legislation that progressively tightened loopholes in religious discrimination laws were all significant steps for their time. Sadly, however, much of that was overshadowed in the public debate by the 'War on Terror' and various policies around the 'Prevent' strand of 'Contest', the UK Counter Terrorism Strategy.²

The tensions created by the 'Prevent years' lingered (and still do), even after the term 'war on terror' was dropped. Eventually most Muslim communities and leaders began to accept that extremism in the Muslim community was a much greater challenge than hitherto expected, and David Miliband as Foreign Secretary acknowledged the impact of foreign policies on the radicalisation of young British Muslims. Another lingering point of discussion has been about representation – who speaks for Islam? While the space here is inadequate to cover this, it is worth flagging up as an on-going debate and one that is fraught with controversy and polarised opinion.

It is no accident that the discussions around faith and public policy seemed to increase after the New Labour government of 1997. As the influence of 'third way politics', adopted by Bill Clinton in the US as well as also others in Canada and Australia, drifted over to the UK where the ideas of Anthony Giddens were already an influence on Tony Blair, the search for a new centre ground politics that sought to reconcile left and right (and avoid their extremes) meant that profound transformations were to take place in British political life (Giddens, 1998). Part of this transformation was that faith (as a motivator of people's

behaviour) became regarded by some as having potential public utility. From a culture in which faith organisations were often habitually excluded from receiving public grants, and where race and culture were given far more emphasis, faith organisation and groups came to be seen as potentially important social (and public) actors. The data on faith, available from the 2001 Census, and the forced debate on religious extremism (post 9/11) meant that faith was going to stay in the realm of public consciousness and, therefore, public policy.

The change in government in 2010 and the arrival of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition provided an opportunity to recast some of that negative cloud, as important moves were made in terms of reducing the stop and search powers of the police, talk of scrapping or reshaping the controversial Prevent programme and creating greater space for civil liberties by rolling back other counter terrorism legislation. However, there was also a stronger challenge by the Coalition government in other areas, such as conservative Muslim preachers, integration and values. David Cameron tapped into another live debate, around multi-culturalism, identity and integration, and in a speech in 2011 declared the need for a 'Muscular Liberalism'. He asserted that, 'Under the doctrine of state multi-culturalism, we have encouraged different cultures to live separate lives, apart from each other and apart from the mainstream. We've failed to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong.' The sentiments were largely (even if not wholly) aimed at Muslim communities, which have been criticised by many other commentators for lack of integration (and for this being a factor in greater extremism).

The statement was quite surprising, considering the government's Citizenship Survey of 2007 showed that British citizens of Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic heritage (together accounting for nearly 60 per cent of Muslims) score highly in their sense of belonging to the UK, in fact higher than 'white' people as a category.³

This brief overview of aspects of policy towards Muslim communities would indicate that while Muslim communities often face multi-level policy challenges, largely the effect of a migrant community confronted by economic and educational underachievement, there are some steps needed before they can develop the social and political capital required to address those policy challenges effectively. Questions around integration need to be addressed carefully. Linked to this, wider discussions around reform in Islamic thought need much more energy and resources. And aside from the specific Muslim dimension, broader discussions around the role of faith in public life as well as the different approaches to the role that faith can play in social capital deserve much more attention.

Integration: towards a British Islam?

At times, the word 'integration' is used to imply two distinct, essentialised entities coming together and one becoming part of the other, or rather the onus being on one to integrate into the other. Perhaps it is better to think of the process of integration as far more complex and fluid, through which a new narrative of the collective 'we' is constantly being re-defined, giving rise to a new vision of being British (and in the context of this discussion, new visions of being Muslim naturally come into the picture).

Sometimes an assumption of the integration discourse is that it will lead to less apparent, less visible minorities – or perhaps less troublesome ones. This may be an

unrealistic assumption to make, as integration is likely to increase the assertiveness of groups – a natural by-product of an increased sense of ownership of the nation. Whereas immigrant grandparents would pass by racism on the streets with their heads down, teenagers who feel a greater sense of ownership of the space around them and feel they can demand equal treatment may not be as passive. A very useful way of thinking about integration was developed at the Commission for Racial Equality before it closed down in 2007. Integration was defined as having three pillars: equality, participation and interaction – equality in that the playing field needs to be levelled and ‘glass ceilings’, as barriers to achievement and ambition, need to be removed; participation in a commitment to a system that engages people as citizens; and interaction in the need for spaces in which different people could interact. Clearly, such a vision for integration removes the onus from any single entity or group and talks more about the climate necessary for people to come together and the collective responsibility for making integration work.

Integration also requires further thought from a religious point of view. It has often been argued that Islamic thought faces a crisis in its creativity and ability to deal adequately with the challenges of the modern world (see for example Rahman, 1982). This ‘crisis of *ijtihad*’ (independent, creative reasoning within the discipline of Islamic law and jurisprudence) has been written about by many. But to understand the severity of the challenge, we also need to reflect on how the world has changed. A number of major events have affected the Muslim world over the last century; of these perhaps the most important were: (a) the onset of colonisation – such that by 1920 around 75 per cent of the Muslim world was under European rule, (b) the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924 (the last of the Muslim ‘empires’ to fall) and (c) globalisation with the possibility of mass migration as well as the inter-connectedness of geographical locations in economic, security and other strategic terms.

Much of the contemporary Muslim discourse around interaction with the modern world developed in the context of anti-colonial struggles and the attempts in the early twentieth century to re-establish the Caliphate. But with mass migration we have also seen the withering away of the old notions of *dar al-islam*⁴ (abode of security and peace) and *dar al-harb* (abode of war), creating a new type of world where one may more safely practice Islam in the heartlands of the West than in traditional Muslim spaces. A large number of Muslims have begun to live as minorities (estimated to be over 30 per cent of all Muslims), to whom the idea of the ‘old order’ of a Caliphate, a *dar al-Islam* is meaningless. Furthermore, through migration and settlement in urban environments, the shift from rural to urban lifestyle and the impact of urban living on the family, schooling and the distribution of wealth have had important influences on the lives of these Muslims in the diaspora.

Given that our globalised world is highly complex, with international conventions, treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and membership of bodies such as the United Nations, if a nation is to be part of the international community and enjoy the privileges which membership entails – sharing of trade relations, subsidies, aid, security/intelligence/military resources, etc. – then one cannot lead a life isolated from the international community.

All this change requires a renewed effort to understand Islam in its new contexts. The recent two-volume report, *Contextualising Islam in Britain* (Suleiman, 2009), is a helpful contribution to this process, amidst the backdrop of a wider series of debates around how Muslims are challenged by and respond to the impact of modernity. Intellectuals such as

Ayoub (1997), Osman (1996), Affendi (2001) and Soroush (2000) have made significant contributions to the debate and have argued that the sources of Islam need to be re-read in more pluralistic terms to be understood better in the modern context. Another important arena of thought is the burgeoning debate around what could be described as an Islamic feminist critique of patriarchy in Muslim history. Scholars such as Barlas (2002) and Wadud (1999) have argued for a re-reading of Islamic sources to create a more nuanced and equal understanding of gender roles in Islam. Debates concerning loyalty have also been at the cutting edge of contemporary Muslim thought. Ramadan (1999) was one of the first to argue for and articulate a legal/theological framework for a strongly rooted European Muslim identity. Hussain (2005) and others have also addressed a number of socio-political issues central to citizenship in a minority British context, including how Muslims could deal with disagreements with the state, how they conceptualise the territory they live in and how they should relate to the people around them with a stronger sense of fraternity, and belonging – as *their* people.

The broad direction of travel for much of this is a reading of Islam that can be more at ease with its European and Western cultural milieu. It seems that critical to this is the science of hermeneutics and how one reads ancient religious texts in new contexts.

Social capital and faith

Part of the newer context is how our whole notion of the public sphere (and what it means to be engaged in it) is undergoing transformation. Robert Putnam, in his famous work on social capital, highlights the decline in cooperative public association in American society. And the US does not seem to be alone; one can identify such trends in other societies: decline in membership of political parties, decline in church attendance, voter apathy, etc. This is not to argue that public association is in a state of collapse, indeed data from Europe and the US do seem to show different results and part of the 'decline' may actually be a sign of transformation of the nature of association as we enter a more globalised digital age. However, the theories around social capital, including the works of prominent sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, in addition to Putnam, put forward a compelling thesis of the importance of relationships and networks in society.

Social capital, as any other form of capital, has the potential to be used positively or negatively. This is further nuanced by the identification of three types of social capital: bonding, bridging and linking. Putnam reminds us that these can be present in different quantities in any given situation. According to Putnam, 'bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging capital provides a sociological WD-40' (Putnam, 2000). Very strong bonding social capital may thus be good for the in-group (its internal solidarity), but can be seen as divisive and isolationist (when considering a more general idea of solidarity) unless balanced by strong bridging and linking social capital.

This brings us on to the point of how faith relates to social capital. Lowndes (2004) identifies three different approaches in the social capital literature: (i) that religion is irrelevant, (ii) that it is detrimental and (iii) that it is invaluable to social capital. Religion most definitely presents an ambivalent input to solidarity and social capital. On the one hand, we have seen fundamentalist and extreme conservative attitudes towards the 'other', the extreme and racist politics of movements such as the Ku Klux Klan or intolerant

religious nationalism or the jihadist terrorism of al-Qaeda. On the other hand, charitable giving, various movements aimed at peace and reconciliation and even the inspiration behind the welfare state, all, or partly, stem from religious motivation. While some interpretations of Christianity may have played a role in maintaining apartheid in South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation process also showed the immense healing potential of Christianity and the role this played in re-building solidarity in a very fragmented society. Examples could also be cited from other faith traditions, including the particularly well-known Sikh tradition of hospitality of the *langar*. Putnam's US experience led him to conclude that:

Faith communities in which people worship together are arguably the single most important repository of social capital in America. . . as a rough rule of thumb, our evidence shows, nearly half of all associational memberships in America are church related, half of all personal philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context. (Putnam, 2000)

In the UK, the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Life and Faith coined the term 'faithful capital' (CULF, 2006). This was in recognition of the role that communities of faith play, particularly through the language (for example hope, mercy, love, forgiveness, hospitality) and practice (for example charity, encounter, nurturing) that they bring to the public arena and the contribution of this to social capital. Baker and Skinner (2006) also talk of 'religious capital', which

should not simply be seen as a 'bankable commodity' that can be stored, counted or controlled. Rather it is being continuously created within a society increasingly interested in and shaped by the values of faith and spirituality. The influence of faith on wider society is in some ways an unexpected turn of events – after all, the largely secular social and political fields of thought assumed (along the lines of secularisation theory in the 1960s and 1970s) that religion would cease to have any significant public impact in the 21st century. It is becoming ever more apparent that this is not, in fact, the case. (ibid: 26)

Because of the congregational nature of religious structures, there seem to be clear motivations for bonding social capital at the very least. But if we also consider aspects of Christian teaching around welcoming the stranger and the downtrodden (see for example Morisy, 2003 and Bretherton, 2006) it is little surprise that churches play a prominent role in refugee and asylum campaigns. But beyond the impact on social capital through social action, places of worship can also provide a direct experience and training ground for generating solidarity. Many religious congregations, particularly in larger cities, are increasingly multi-ethnic spaces; they also provide a potential for interaction across boundaries of class and wealth, and crucially across generations. Most mosques demonstrate this in the way that congregations are drawn from across age and social backgrounds. But beyond mosques, community development and other charitable activities are often organised through a plethora of community organisations that also show this type of cross-linking in the way they work, and the voluntary resources they manage to attract in order to sustain activities.

Islam has a very strong tradition of social justice and encouragement for people to participate in public life. In addition to its more esoteric and spiritual teachings, the

Qur'an describes one of the roles of the believers as people who 'promote the good, and discourage the wrong'. Furthermore, a strong emphasis on community life and mutual support has ensured that notions such as *zakat* (a religious obligation to pay 2.5 per cent of one's wealth in charity) and *sadaqah* (voluntary charity) have been popularly upheld among Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad emphasised, 'he who eats his fill while his neighbour starves is not one of us' (Muslim, 2000; Bukhari, 2007) and that 'food for two is enough for three' (Muslim, 2000). Such basic teachings have created a devout community which views social engagement, community building, charity and sacrifice as religious and human obligations.

Religion and public life

All of this raises, at some level, the sensitive question of faith and politics and their relationship. A democratic culture of debate pre-supposes a critical exposure of one's ideas. One can speak with deep conviction, but not insist that one bears the only legitimate view because 'that's what God tells me'. Furthermore, one should expect robust critiques of one's views, however deeply held. Thankfully, the secular arrangement we have creates a structural plurality for difference to be aired. But one could say that we would be worse off if we insisted that religious values should not be articulated at all in the public sphere.

If faith groups are to be part of the life-blood of healthy social capital, then their role in providing welcoming hospitality, creating and maintaining familiarity and nurturing solidarity needs to be acknowledged more strongly by policy makers. Yes, faith can be divisive, but then the impact of individualism is probably a more corrosive and pernicious factor, leading to isolation and fragmentation of society. At a time when some people do not even know their immediate neighbours well, because of pressures of work, what do 'community cohesion', 'solidarity' and being 'neighbourly' actually mean?

Having said that, religious people may need to think more seriously about the 'secular', and move away from knee-jerk reactions to the word. The engagement of faith in the public arena is not really a conversation about belief in God, or in a religion. It is not an exploration of the questions surrounding the existence of God, nor is it about the rights of people to believe in certain ideas – religious or otherwise. At its core, this is really a question of 'how do we live together'? Given the presence of different values, faiths, beliefs and cultures, how do we manage those differences and live together? Here the author has some sympathy for Rawls' notion of 'public reason' (Rawls, 2005). We do need some sort of shared language and basis to discuss matters that are deeply held and passionate to us, when we want to bring those ideas into the common, public space.

Furthermore, it is important to distinguish between different forms of secularism: procedural and programmatic, that is structural pluralism, neutrality of the state and management of the public sphere versus more ideological, anti-religious sentiment (see Williams, 2006; Birt *et al.*, 2010). It is striking to see the different forms of secularism operative in, for example, USA, UK and France.

Big Society

Even though the term 'Big Society' became a point of debate and an important policy platform of the Coalition government after the 2010 elections (having previously appeared

in the Conservative manifesto), many of the ideas behind it were not new and elements of it featured in New Labour policy. The aim is

to create a climate that empowers local people and communities, building a big society that will 'take power away from politicians and give it to people'. (Downing Street, 2010)

The emphasis is thus on localism (as opposed to centralisation), on community (as opposed to individualism), a transfer of power to citizens (as opposed to power being the preserve of politicians), on civil society and civic responsibility (as opposed to reliance on the state) and perhaps most crucially on volunteering and active citizenship.

But the policy has been faced by a number of significant challenges, not, in general, because its critics disagree fundamentally with the idea of self-reliance and volunteering, but rather because of the climate, context and manner in which the policy has been unveiled. At a time of heavy cuts to public services, a deteriorating economic climate, in which volunteering is likely to decline rather than increase, and one of great uncertainty about jobs, careers and people's futures, the policy has not been welcomed with open arms. In a way, the policy takes some of the very positive philanthropic élan of the US and tries to implant it in the British landscape of reliance on the welfare state, in the context of strong warnings that the welfare state – benefits, the NHS and other services – is unsustainable in its current form. Its strongest critics have however argued that it is a mask for cutting back not only on welfare, but the state itself, and others have argued that we may 'end up with a more troubled and diminished society, not a bigger one' (Coote, 2010).

In the context of this, faith communities seem stuck between playing their traditional role as mass mobilisers of voluntary workers in civil society on the one hand, and speaking with a prophetic voice against inequality and leaving behind the weak and the needy. This is not a new tension, and work in the US has shown similar concerns:

If faith-based service provision is seen as an alternative to the public sector and as a way to off-set cuts in public services or capacities, then the issue of whether faith-based organizations really have the capacity to serve this role in the long term is very important. If they do not, and faith-based organizations in general are providing limited service, only particular aspects of services, or 'boutique' services, then they are not a viable long-run option and resources would be better directed toward government agencies and other public or private actors. (Hula, 2007)

It is perhaps useful to point out that government and society are not locked into a 'zero-sum game' – a bigger society and greater self-reliance of citizens does not automatically imply loss of vital services and safety nets for the most vulnerable. Faith communities themselves may in fact benefit from greater independence and self-reliance from the state but they also need to think hard about about the precise role they can, and wish to, play as civic actors.

Summary: social policy beyond identity politics

Muslim engagement with social policy issues needs to move out of parochial concerns, to wider concerns of the social good, or the 'common good'. Government 'engagement with Muslims' must also be broader in terms of partnerships, and also broader in terms

of issues. Counter terrorism and security, or even integration and cohesion, cannot be the main prisms for addressing citizens of Muslim background, or we risk sending the message that Muslims are all potential terrorists or misfits. And there is a need for a real debate around how we now risk exceptionalising Muslims and consequently reifying their identities further by treating them as a distinct body even when the subjects under consideration, whether security, unemployment, economic conditions, and so on, apply equally to all other citizens.

Far from harkening back to a clash of civilisations, or even a clash of values, the presence of Islam in our midst should actually be a reminder, to both Muslims and other citizens, of the common concerns and needs we all have as human beings. Most citizens aspire to common, human needs and desires. Think of freedom, equality, justice, accountable governance, rule of law, prosperity, education, charity, protection of rights – such values, aspirations and ideas have no single creed, no specific culture and no particular civilisation. They are now truly universal and human aspirations. The recent developments in the Arab world show vividly how a whole cluster of nations that were effectively written off from the democratic tradition aspire to the very same free, open societies that European nations historically, and today, have been fighting for. If only we were able to recognise this common pursuit for the good life and that we genuinely do aspire to the common good, we could move beyond the factionalism of identity politics and communalism. But to reach that, we would need to learn more about each other, develop mutual respect (and at least tolerance) and learn to think of wider common interests, rather than narrow communitarian interests.

Finally, on a more abstract (and personal) note – as much of the discussion around social policy is about how people live together and how they maximise their happiness – we need to think of where the real divides actually are in society. Often we are sold a vision of fragmentation along ethnic or religious divides. Is this true? Are the real divides between religions, cultures, civilisations and nations? Are they between the religious and non-religious? Or are they actually *within* these ‘groups’. For example, it may be that a liberal Muslim often has more in common with a liberal Christian, Jew or agnostic than a more traditional or conservative Muslim. If this is true, then we really need to shift the terms of the current debate, which often frames people against each other based on which ‘community’ they belong to or come from – be that ethnic, religious or ideological. With such a framing, good intentions and good will can get frustrated and dissipated as the outcome is almost predictably a consolidation of pre-existent identities.

This means that we need to shift the parameters of, and the nature of, the debate and have a new type of conversation altogether.

Notes

1 One could identify much earlier campaigns around recognition, education, halal food, burial needs, requirements of divorce and marriage laws, etc.

2 Contest is the UK Counter terrorism strategy and contains four strands: Protect, Prepare, Pursue and Prevent. It was last updated in 2009. The Prevent dimension of the strategy, which has been largely about working in and with Muslim communities in order to prevent terrorism, has been the most controversial even though it is arguable a relatively small part of the overall strategy, at least in budgetary terms.

3 Bangladeshi: 91 per cent; Pakistani: 87 per cent; Whites: 84 per cent (Citizenship Survey, 2007).

4 These conceptions of the pre-modern world were devised by Muslim theologians and political philosophers in the early era of Islam to distinguish and categorise different territorial realms.

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