



CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

THE 2008 KEITH JOSEPH MEMORIAL LECTURE

HOW TO BEAT THE SCARGILLS OF ISLAM

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First I must thank the Centre for Policy Studies for inviting me to give this lecture. It is particularly generous of you because I am the Chairman of another – I almost said a rival – think-tank, Policy Exchange.

But of course the marketplace of ideas should benefit from sharing of this kind. No one who wants new thoughts or new policies to flourish ever seeks a monopoly of ideas. In ideas, as in business, monopoly gives power to the wrong people, and constricts the quality and quantity of supply.

The man after whom this lecture is named understood better than almost any other prominent Tory politician how new ideas – and old ideas refurbished – can transform politics. In the mid-1970s, Keith Joseph observed a series of economic and political failures which, he realised, had intellectual origins. The wrong policies had been pursued, not out of some strange personal incompetence, but because the wrong ideas had been believed.

It is part of Keith's charm and his greatness that, in his criticism of the wrong ideas, he did not spare himself. He concluded that he had been wrong about many things – public spending, deficit financing, the control of inflation, the growth of the welfare state, the reform of the trade unions – and he sincerely wanted to understand why. The Centre for Policy Studies was the essential vehicle for this rethink. The result was a set of ideas which Margaret Thatcher - in a way that Keith himself could not have done - could deploy with unique political success. Instead of being the slaves to half-defunct ideas, the Conservatives became the standard-bearers for successful, living ones.



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A possibly apocryphal story of Keith Joseph goes as follows. Keith did a television interview, and it had not gone well. “Oh dear,” said Keith, “That was dreadful. I want to do it again.” “I’m afraid it was live, Sir Keith,” said the interviewer. “I know,” said Keith, undaunted, “but I still want to do it again”.

I greatly admire that spirit, which still tries to correct its mistakes, even when it seems too late. Without such a spirit, after all, how could conservatism survive? In the 1970s, it seemed to many as if Britain’s mistakes had been made, as it were, live on TV, and so were past correcting. Keith Joseph proved that it was not so. I am honoured to have the chance to speak in his memory tonight. It is a particular honour to be doing so in the presence of Keith’s widow, Yolanda, and of Lady Thatcher herself.

And my subject tonight is one in which, I fear, conservatives, with a big and a small c, have made a great many mistakes. It is one which needs a Josephian rethink.

It is Islam in Britain.

It pains me to say it, but I actually think that the Labour Party, despite its well-known excesses of political correctness, has a better body of knowledge and a more vigorous debate on this subject than is to be found in the conservative tribe, although I am proud to say that our work at Policy Exchange has made up very fast for a lot of lost time. Because of its ideological obsession with multiculturalism, however, and the games it plays with identity politics, Labour is inextricably enmeshed in contradictions on this subject, so I think conservatives have a unique opportunity here.

If I had to characterise bad conservative attitudes to the problems relating to Islam in Britain, I would say that they tend to fall into three main categories.

The first, and I state it baldly, takes the form of a statement like “They [meaning Muslims] are all ghastly – the religion and the people are primitive and fanatical; everything about having them in this country is a nightmare.” Being the most extreme, this attitude is seldom expressed publicly, but I think it is strong in many minds.



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The second bad attitude is opportunistic. “Ah,” it says, “There could be some votes here. It doesn’t matter what Muslim groups say, or whom we ally with, so long as we outmanoeuvre the Government. If extremists are embarrassing a Labour council by trying to force Muslim girls to be permitted to wear the niqab in schools or to take a hard line on Kashmir, or whatever seems to be the thing of the moment, let’s join in the fun. We’ll ally with anyone.”

The flip side of a hostile prejudice against a group is naivete – half-credulous, half-cynical – about dealing with people who claim to speak for that group. There’s a problem with Muslims, goes the line, so let’s do a deal with them! No effort is made to find out *which* Muslims should be negotiated with, or to ask whether a political game based on religion is a good idea. Almost all such deals, by the way, have been unsuccessful.

The third bad attitude – perhaps the most common among middle-class, respectable, conservative England – could be expressed as “Dear boy, this is a very painful subject. Let’s talk about something else”.

The huge defeat of the Conservative Party in the election of 1997 and the repeat performance in 2001 drove the party back into its rural and suburban redoubts and so cut it off from many things which were happening in Britain. It is not an accident that the handful of Conservative MPs who are well-informed on Muslim issues – notably, the front-bench spokesman, Paul Goodman – generally tend to be those few who have a significant number of Muslims in their constituency. By and large, Conservatives are still abysmally ignorant of the subject.

The opting out from all of this is part of a wider demoralisation in conservative culture in these years. In the time of the Millennium, the death of Diana, “dumbing down”, the cult of celebrity and Big Brother, the growth of incivility, the hunting ban, and the decline of organised Christianity, many conservative-minded people started to say things like, “I don’t recognise my own country”. They felt so alienated, particularly from their own cities, that they wanted to avoid thinking about problems of multiculturalism, and of terrorism. So when bombs actually went off in 2005 and actually killed people, the fact that



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they exploded in our capital city should, if anything, have made them even more alarming for the whole country. For sections of Tory Britain, however, they seemed remote, almost easy to dismiss. This is what happens, people told themselves, in ghastly modern London.

It is very understandable that studying terrorism, as Michael Burleigh puts it in his new book on the subject, *Blood and Rage*, “frequently lowers the spirits”. But the conservative abdication on the matter has been very dangerous because it is a prelude to defeatism. It contains the germ of the mentality which prevailed among non-Nazi supporters of Vichy France – they believed that the country they loved was finished, so they abandoned their patriotism.

I am glad to say that this defeatism is not characteristic of the current leadership of the Conservative Party, which is starting to engage more actively with the issue under discussion. In recent weeks, David Cameron has made a series of speeches – most notably to the Community Security Trust last week – in which he has confronted some of the hardest questions.

And I am also glad to note that the wind of public opinion has changed. The worst excesses of Cool Britannia and unthinking multiculturalism are now falling from favour, and so, therefore, is the despairing reaction to them. Everyone is now trying to find what our Prime Minister calls British values, even though few seem to have much idea what they might be.

So now is a good time to sketch out a possible conservative approach to the question of Islam in Britain.

The first thing to acknowledge is that it is unusual, though not unprecedented, for modern political discourse to discuss a religion at all. It is not for any political party to say what Islam, as a religion, is, even if what that party says about it is complimentary.

After September 11, politicians kept telling us nervously that “Islam is a religion of peace”. I do not see how they knew. It would have been even worse, of course, if they had said, “Islam is a religion of war”. The point is that, while it is always a good idea for people interested in history and culture to study any



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great religion, they are very unwise to make public judgements about something as complicated, sensitive and important as the religion itself. As a Christian, I am pleased to hear expressions of sympathy with and interest in my faith by people in public life, but if secular leaders were to start telling me what my religion really was, I would be irritated. And if they started to denigrate it, I would be furious. It would prevent me from listening to specific criticisms they might make of my Church’s leaders or of things done in Christianity’s name, even if such criticisms were justified.

Why, then, speak of Islam at all in a political context? Why not break the subject down into the component parts which make it politically relevant? Why not talk, for example, about the ethnic elements – Bangladeshi, Pakistani and so on – or the class ones, or the foreign policy ones?

Certainly, there is much to be said for such an approach. The issue of Kashmir is often exploited to pit Muslim against Hindu, but it is not a matter of religion. Many of the controversies about women’s freedom to marry, or interpretations of appropriate dress, probably have more to do with the cultural expectations of particular ethnic groups than with the teachings of the Koran (though, because all religions originate and take root in particular places, the one is not completely separable from the other).

The trouble is, however, that the most vocal leaders of Islam in this country today themselves advance their religion in a political way. They say – though obviously they do not all say exactly the same thing – that Muslims cannot support any British military action against a Muslim nation, or that it is an Islamic duty to oppose the existence of Israel, or that British law should be altered to make it a criminal offence to insult their prophet Mohammed.

Some – the organisation Hizb ut Tahrir, for instance, which the Government promised to ban in 2005, but has still not got round to doing so – even argue that what they see as God-given law – the sharia – is the only law which they should obey and that Muslims therefore owe no allegiance to this land which they inhabit. A revived caliphate, they believe, is the only legitimate form of rule in the world. The Muslim Council of Britain, which is generally taken to be the



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umbrella organisation for all Muslims in this country, is in reality dominated by followers of the Pakistani ideologue, Mawdudi, who, in his book, *Jihad in Islam*, said “Islam wishes to do away with all states and governments which are opposed to the ideology and programme of Islam”, and should do so, if necessary, “by the power of the sword”.

Some well-meaning and intelligent people have even persuaded themselves that the best way to deal with such views is to accommodate them. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, recently seemed to advance the view that you could have a little bit of sharia – he proposed it in, of all things, marriage – worked into our own law, as if it were an exotic herb which could be used to spice up our multi-cultural soup. He does not seem to realise that, for those who call for its imposition on the world today, sharia has to be the only dish on the menu.

So conservatives have to deal with these claims made on behalf of the Muslim religion because they are claims which demand a response in the public sphere.

How should they answer them? Not, as I say, by generalising about the nature of Islam. Nor by treating the Muslim presence in Britain as colonial administrators in far-flung provinces would once have treated religious groups among the people they subjugated. Such pro-consuls, trying to keep the imperial show on the road, often found themselves doing deals with the tribal or spiritual leaders, affording them group rights in return for peace. This technique sometimes had horrifying results: in the context of first century Judaea, it involved a deal between the Roman imperium and the Jewish religious authorities which produced the pseudo-judicial execution of Jesus Christ. But it may in some cases have been a necessary way of running a place far from home in which the ruling power was always in a tiny minority.

It is absolutely inapplicable to our own country today. We are not talking about an imperial system, but about a parliamentary democracy which cannot function without a common citizenship. We must all live under the same law. We cannot divide and rule: we must unite and rule.

To do so, our elected representatives must have the necessary knowledge.



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If an average Member of Parliament is approached by a church group today, he probably has a rough idea about the nature of the church or churches involved. He knows that a Catholic church is different from a Methodist one, and that the Revd Ian Paisley speaks for very different people and beliefs than the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster. Yet how many MPs today, especially Conservative MPs, when approached by Muslim groups, really know whether the people petitioning them are moderate Sufis or Barelwis, or extremist Wahhabis or Salafists? How often do they know where they get their money from – the answer, among many of the extremists, is Saudi Arabia – or what are their links with foreign powers or foreign organisations such as the extremist Muslim Brotherhood or Jamat-e-Islami (both of which are highly influential in the Muslim Council of Britain)?

Quite often, there have been farcical situations in which Muslims sympathetic to terrorism have been thrown out of mosques by groups described in the press as moderate but which turn out to be dubious themselves. The Finsbury Park Mosque, for example, once occupied by the notorious Abu Hamza, later, with police encouragement, came under the influence of Azzam Tamimi, a vocal supporter of suicide bombings in the Middle East and of the terrorist organisation, Hamas. As David Cameron complained last week, the Cordoba Foundation is about to receive a substantial grant of public money as part of the programme to prevent extremism. Yet its chairman is a supporter of the militant Muslim Brotherhood and it recently held a meeting giving a platform to Hizb ut Tahrir and other Islamists who argued that British democracy was a sham and that Muslims should take no part in it.

Phoney Muslim moderates, beloved of the media, are a great feature of our age. Look at Tariq Ramadan, for example, lionised at Oxford while considered so extreme in France that he found it easier to leave and work here. There are genuine Muslim moderates all right, but to a host culture whose secret thought is too often “They’re all the same”, accurate recognition is difficult.

So it is very important to study all the groups in this country that claim to speak in the name of Islam, and to build up proper data about them. I would argue that we should ban those which actually incite violence and create a list of



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those which, though not apparently so extreme, nevertheless advocate such anti-social attitudes that they should not receive public money or official recognition.

One of the most powerful lessons from Ed Husain’s remarkable book, *The Islamist*, is that the people most intimidated by Islamist extremism in this country are Muslims themselves. It is they, not the rest of us, who bear the brunt of abuse and threats in their mosques, in their student societies, youth groups and other organisations. We need to realise that every time the wider society enters into dialogue with the extremists we are not only dealing unwittingly with bad people, we are also empowering them against good people. We must not keep on making these mistakes, which are as often as not mistakes of simple fact, as well as mistakes of policy.

Sometimes, I fear, it will emerge that people who genuinely do represent a sizeable body of opinion or of people in their area are themselves worryingly extreme. When this happens, it must be confronted, not evaded. In his speech last week, David Cameron related how he went to the large Birmingham Central Mosque last year and was told that the July 7 London bombers had, in reality, been agents of MI5. What most dismayed David was that this insane message came to him not from some isolated fanatic, but from the chairman of the mosque.

In trying to work out how best to pick one’s way through this minefield, I am grateful to my colleague at Policy Exchange, Dean Godson, for the following comparison which should resonate with a Conservative audience.

Think of the long debate about how best to deal with trade union militancy and with its relationship to Communist infiltration during the Cold War. It was not, in fact, the Conservatives who first tried to tackle this. It began as a conflict within the Labour movement in which a few brave souls like Frank Chapple of the Electricians, would not bow to the extremist tactics.

The problem was two-fold. One was that the union bosses, once all-powerful, could not longer reliably deliver their members. In the emerging welfare state, workers no longer depended absolutely on their union. Wildcat strikes were even more of a problem than official ones. So even sensible union leaders were less and less useful.



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The other problem was that the Left, quite often supported by Moscow, had worked its way into the interstices of union and party power. Moderates split between those who sought to deny or placate the reality of extremism and those who knew it must be confronted. Labour governments decided to get tough, then, for electoral or internal party advantage, to go soft, inventing things like “Solomon Binding” or the Social Contract. Utter confusion resulted. There were all the agonies about the Militant Tendency. It was partly because of all this that the SDP emerged.

And, by the way, if you want to study the political exploitation of extremist feeling - both in the Labour movement and among Muslims – consider the career of Ken Livingstone, who will be Mayor of London for a couple more months. It is a cautionary tale.

In this area of trade union militancy, the Conservatives were first of all timorous and ignorant, hoping simply to profit from Labour’s travails. When they did try to deal with trade union reform, under Ted Heath’s government, they burnt their fingers by using the wrong sort of legislation. When this failed, they divided. There were many, led eventually by Jim Prior, who thought that trade union power could not be curtailed but could only be appeased. The important thing for them was to befriend the more moderate union leaders and cut deals with them.

The alternative view, emerging from this Centre for Policy Studies and led eventually by Keith Joseph and by Margaret Thatcher, and joined by Norman Tebbit, was to question the premise. Did union leaders really represent the people in whose name they claimed to speak, they asked. Or was it rather that their legal privileges and lack of internal democracy meant that they constantly *mis*represented their members and even exploited them? Extremists got away with their misdeeds: moderate majorities were exploited by show-of-hands ballots and other procedural tricks. The Joseph/Thatcher view was that, if only they had the power, trade union members would not follow their leaders to self-improvement, nor their militant shop-stewards to wrecking tactics. Their interests were economic, not political, they believed. Given the chance, they would act responsibly in those interests.



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We all know that this was proved triumphantly right. Union members *were* given the chance, and when they got it, they voted for the most part against strikes and in favour of better working practices. The last great struggle was the miners’ strike. Everyone remembers that Mrs Thatcher won. What people tend to forget is the fundamental weakness which undermined the union leader, Arthur Scargill, from the beginning. Having lost ballots in earlier disputes, he always refused to ballot his members on the strike. His position was therefore illegitimate from the start. A Conservative government at last had the courage to point this out, and to resist, backed up by the legal reforms which it had introduced.

Obviously the analogies between British trade unions and an ancient world religion are inexact, to put it mildly. But I do think there is a lesson here, particularly with the Scargill example. The difficulty for the government in confronting Scargill was that he was the authentic, indeed the elected, leader of the miners. He did express some of their hopes and fears. He was one of them. But on the other hand, he was an extremist and an egotist and a destructionist, a man who wanted the last battle with the evil Tories and was uninterested in what it might cost his own people. He could only prevail by suppressing dissent from his own members.

This is not, perhaps, so different from some of the extremists who claim to speak in the name of Islam today. They do stand for something among their co-religionists. If they did not, they could be utterly ignored. They do tap into grievances, some genuine, some chimerical. Some of them, as turned out to be the case with Scargill, are supported by malign foreign interests and money which make them more formidable. But, being people who, often explicitly, reject democracy, they are not truly representative of Muslims in Britain – much less so, in fact, even than Scargill was of British miners. Indeed, they have hijacked Islam in Britain, a process which first became obvious nearly 20 years ago with the protests against Salman Rushdie, and is charted very clearly by Ed Husain in *The Islamist*. Since the arousal of passions about Bosnia in the mid-1990s, the supporters of jihad have made the running in this country and frightened too many moderates into silence.



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Those of us who are not Muslims cannot, ultimately, dethrone the extremists alone. As with the unions and their leaders, that is for Muslims themselves to do. But what we can do is to question their claims, circumvent their campaigns, keep their hands off public money – often distributed, laughably, incredibly, in the name of community cohesion. We can reach out to all those who see themselves not as Muslims who happen to be in Britain but as proudly British *and* proudly Muslim – and also, indeed, to all those people of Muslim origin who dislike having their place in British society defined by their religious identity.

In doing so, we should bear in mind the great Tory words of Edmund Burke about revolutionary agitation: “Because half-a-dozen grasshoppers under a fern make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, reposed beneath the British oak, chew the cud and are silent, pray do not imagine that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field.”

In advocating this approach, I realise that some will think me over-optimistic. The clash of civilisations theorists argue that there is a titanic struggle between Western values and Islamic ones, and it is simply a question of making sure that the right side wins. Some believe that Islam is intrinsically, hopelessly repressive and anti-modern.

I do not have the expertise to answer these people conclusively, and I certainly think that, in all dealings with the subject of Islam in Britain, conservatives should be wary about undercurrents they may not understand. The biographies of some of the July 7 bombers taught us that young men who seem to tick the boxes of integration into modern Britain can in fact be wooed into extremist beliefs.

Nor do I at all agree with those who say that we should never refer to “Islamic terrorism” on the grounds that there is no such thing. The terrorists themselves believe in Islamic terrorism and sincerely, though misguidedly, do what they do in the name of their God. This cannot be ignored. Islam worldwide is clearly going through a phase of boiling instability, a phase that has been known in the history of most religions, including, of course, Christianity. I hear that the security service have agents in every mosque in this country now. If this is true, I do not think it is unwarranted surveillance: it is good sense. We certainly need to be on our guard.



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But it is an observable fact that probably more than two million Muslims live in this country today, no less peacefully than their non-Muslim neighbours, and very large numbers of them have jobs in the wider civil society. They bring up families. Mostly, they speak English. They are our fellow-citizens, our worthy fellow-citizens. I find it very hard to believe that the unyielding, angry, harsh discourse which comes from the noisier Muslim spokesmen is really the preferred tone of most Muslims. I find it even harder to believe that the demonic violence of al Qaeda and Hamas or the literalist rigidities of the Taleban or Wahhabi Saudi Arabia are really what most Muslims in Britain want.

Indeed, to return to my trade union analogy, even if we wanted to do a base deal with the extreme, self-appointed spokesmen of Islam today, we should recognise that they cannot deliver. Nor can any other form of Muslim leadership at the present time. Everything is in flux. I suspect that what we are seeing is a battle about modernity. Fading away are the old, essentially tribal leaders who came from the countries which composed our immigrant populations. The struggle to replace them is led, on one side, by a rigorist, revolutionary creed, a sort of God-intoxicated Militant Tendency which thinks it is in the vanguard of history. Hizb ut Tahrir, for example, though reactionary in many ways, sells itself as an organisation that scorns most of what happens in mosques, puts little emphasis on prayer and even, like several other Islamist groups, holds out the prospect of much wider marriage opportunities than are traditional. It acts modern.

On the other side, are those genuine modernisers who long to live at peace in the free, western world, who actually value the fact that their freedom of worship is much greater than it would be in many Muslim countries, who are in Britain by choice as well as by chance.

I think the extremists are as brittle as were Arthur Scargill or Militant and, unless we are so foolish as to help them, they will not prevail. The bearded men who brandish placards calling for the beheading of those who insult Islam because of a few harmless cartoons will come to look as outdated as those pickets with their mutton-chop whiskers gathered round braziers and shouting “Scab!” in the interminable nationalised industry disputes of the 1970s.



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Gradually – we are seeing the ground prepared in the writing of people like Ed Husain or Shiraz Maher – a Muslim leadership will emerge that wants to come to terms with the West. Indeed, such a leadership will not see the West as its opposite. Conservatives, who have the advantage over the Left of being unembarrassed by British history, should study the interesting fact that tens of thousands of Muslims volunteered – they were not conscripted - to fight for the British Empire in two world wars. In the first of those wars, they fought against the Ottoman Empire, to which, in theory, they owed spiritual allegiance. Why did they do so? Not, surely, because they were offered multiculturalism, but because they felt themselves respected and secure in the self-confident British political culture of that time.

To be sure, this new moderate leadership which may emerge will demand a price, and it may be a dangerous one, for example, about foreign policy, but it will take its legitimate place in the wider British society instead of seeking a place apart.

I want to end by advocating two things which might appear to be incompatible, but which I believe that conservatism must always try to reconcile.

The first is to bear in mind at all times the importance of the individual rather than the group. A believing Muslim will naturally regard his belief as encompassing his whole life, not just his prayer or his Friday observance, but that will not mean that he necessarily wants his place in our society to be a Muslim one, or that he makes no separation between his personal beliefs and his politics. Our western language of rights and freedom puts great stress on the fact that each person is entitled to choice and autonomy. We see this as the way that we make real, adult moral decisions and we regard that personal space as, to use a word which secular society otherwise avoids, sacred.

We must never allow our respect for any organised religion to forget the individual rights of its adherents. We must not fall into the trap of speaking of Muslims as being defined, for purposes of most public policy and law, by their religion. For most purposes, there is no need for public policy in this country to speak to Muslims through self-appointed gatekeepers. Muslims here, like Jews and Hindus and Sikhs and Christians and nothings and don't knows, are individual men and women and they are British. For most of the things in life that concern the state and the law, that should be enough.



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The second point is that, purged of its current political deformations, Islam will indeed have things from which British society can profit. It may help our culture recover some strengths we have lost. I am in correspondence with a Muslim thinker who criticises the “identity politics” pursued by so many Islamist leaders. He says such attitudes produce only anger and pride. He suggests that, for a devout Muslim, character development is much more important. Muslims are enjoined, he says, to be “scholars of the heart”. In Islam, the word “honour” does not have to go with the word “killing”, but can have a real meaning which it has too often lost in our secular society. So can ideas of dignity, of obligation to elderly parents, of community. He quotes a Sufi saying: “If every man were to mend a man, then every man would be mended”. Our broken society of which conservatives rightly talk so much today has need of such mending.

If you look at the history of Judaism in this country, you can see an on the whole successful development in which purely Jewish customs of no application to anyone else, such as dietary laws, have successfully coexisted with an integration which has enriched our own society. Margaret Thatcher was often eloquent on how Jews had brought to Britain a more active idea of family, a greater spirit of charitable generosity and a stronger idea of enterprise than those of most gentiles. Keith Joseph himself was a Jew, and this identity only enhanced his contribution to British life, rather than weakening it.

I do realise that there are problems with a proselytising religion like Islam (or indeed Christianity) which do not apply to Judaism. I do realise that one of the worst problems with the current state of Islam is the widespread anti-semitism which Islamists encourage. But I still see no reason in principle why a religion which has built civilisations for 1300 years should not be able to enrich our own. It is not as if British culture in its current state were incapable of improvement!

Perhaps I am being too fanciful, but I do see the possibility of a liberal conservatism which is fed by the tributaries of Islamic thought and culture. Who knows? Perhaps in a hundred or even 50 years the CPS, or indeed, Policy Exchange, will be able to hold a prestigious conservative lecture named after some great Conservative politician, who was also a Muslim.