

Not Enough Islam?

How mainstream Islam can challenge extremism

When Peter and I discussed what I should talk about this evening, it didn't take us long to agree a subject.

One of my special interests is the current tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims, and indeed within Islam itself. As some of you know, I represent more Muslims than any other Conservative MP, and am also a party spokesman on community cohesion in the Commons.

I'm not, of course, a Muslim myself, and this speech may therefore be regarded in some quarters as an impertinence - to which my reply is that it may be useful to have a perspective from someone who has at least an acquaintance with a representative slice of Islamic life in Britain.

Your special interest is culture – which doesn't just mean the arts. The tensions which I referred to a moment ago are affecting politics and culture profoundly, both here and abroad, and I know that both Douglas Murray and Michael Gove have spoken to you about them.

So I want to follow suit – and to begin by imagining the story of a young British Muslim in his teens. English is his first language. It's his father's second language. His mother can manage a few phrases but, like his father, speaks Urdu or Pahari, the tongues of the local mosque.

He went there himself as a child to learn how to recite the Koran. He hasn't much broader Islamic education. He doesn't go there any longer - after all, the Friday sermon is in a language he doesn't habitually use, and the mosque is run by men of his father's or even his grandfather's generation. In short, he knows little about his own religion.

These are the known facts. They're not in themselves unusual – unlike the path that this young man takes only a few years later: first, to surf fanatical websites on his home computer; then to visit a terrorist camp abroad and learn to kill, and finally to blow himself up and murder others in a suicide bombing.

What leads him to take this journey can never fully be grasped. All that's certain is that at some point between his childhood and his death he was persuaded by Al Qaeda that it's his duty to murder in the name of Islam.

Now, I don't mean to suggest that all terrorists who've killed in Britain, and who claim to act in the name of their religion, are necessarily born into it or were born British, or are young men.

Certainly, Al Qaeda search for potential recruits wherever they can find them. These obviously include converts and older people and women. But converts and older people are smaller pools in which to fish, since there are relatively few converts and older people are more likely to be settled in their lives.

Al Qaeda and others have used women suicide bombers abroad. But experience suggests that in Britain the organisation is likely to snare its largest number of recruits among younger Muslim men – men like the one in my imaginary story, or like Mohammed Siddique Khan and the group that carried out 7/7, or like the 21/7 and Crevice and Glasgow airport gangs.

Now I want to assume in passing that firmer border control and better intelligence abroad can deal with much of the problem from beyond our borders.

The question I want to ask this evening is domestic – namely, what, if anything, can Government do to persuade young British Muslims who are vulnerable to Al Qaeda to reject terror and fully embrace the British way?

I believe that there are three potential strategic answers to this question.

The first is appeasement. If our armed forces withdraw from Afghanistan – the argument runs – if we simply let Iran acquire nuclear weapons without sanctions or resistance; if we actively seek the replacement of our allies in the Islamic world by Islamists, if we abandon our support for the existence of Israel and if we connive in Britain at special legal dispensations for Muslims, then the problem will go away. Its response to the young man I described is to grant him moral legitimacy.

You don't have to be a neo-conservative – as I am not – to dismiss this option with the contempt it deserves. It's hard to perceive how abandoning parts of Afghanistan to Al Qaeda could help weaken that movement rather than strengthen it; how writing special sharia provisions into British law could strengthen community cohesion rather than weaken it, above all, how knuckling under to extremism could possibly help mainstream Islam worldwide.

Nor is it easy to see how wiping Israel off the map – an act that would both shame and damage us were we to aid it - would help solve the agony of Darfur, the civil war in Somalia, the plight of Chechnya or Kashmir, the Al Qaeda-backed terrorism that spreads from Algeria to West China, or the economic, technological, social, political underdevelopment of the wider Middle East.

This underdevelopment has been chronicled most tellingly by Arab scholars and policy makers themselves. Over a million copies of the UNDP's Arab Development report were downloaded from the internet after it was published in 2002. Its analysis was, in Chris Patten's words, "captivatingly honest and politically bold".

“How could it be” – he asked – “that in terms of economic performance in the last quarter of the 20th century, the only region that did worse than the Arab countries was sub-Saharan Africa? Why had personal incomes stagnated through these years? Why had wealth per head in this region fallen from a fifth of the OECD level to a seventh? Why were productivity, investment efficiency and foreign direct investment so low? How could the combined GDP of all Arab countries be lower than that of a single European country, Spain. The psychological effect of this underdevelopment on a world that, until the renaissance, boxed more or less even with the West is sometimes called “the prestige gap”.

Patten’s means of bridging this gap are “governance, gender, and education” – his summary of the report’s own prescription of full respect for human rights, the complete empowerment of Arab women and what it called “the consolidation of knowledge acquisition and its effective utilisation”.

In other words, education. And the whole package - described in other words - sounds pretty much like democracy to me. A discussion on democracy and the broader Middle East would take me wide of my aim tonight. All I will say in passing is that the general case for democracy – elected governments, the rule of law, a free economy, an impartial civil service, strong civic institutions, respect for minorities – is surely incontestable, and a case, by the way, that opinion polling finds strong support for in the Middle East itself.

I turn now from the first strategic option, appeasement, to the second option, assimilation.

This view holds that government may not be able to do very much, if anything at all, to persuade young British Muslims who are vulnerable to Al Qaeda to reject terror. It maintains that the answer to terrorism and separatism lies with security rather than politics. In so far as politics can help at all, it goes on, this must stress the assimilation of Muslims into our predominately

secular culture. At heart, this school of thought usually believes that Islam in particular, if not religion in general, is at the root of separatist extremism. Its answer to the young man I described is to lock him up and seek to persuade him of the merits of liberal secularism, in roughly that order.

I've gone on the record several times to trace the connection between terrorism and separatism. I've said that there's a clear connection between non-violent separatism, with its hatred of the *kuffar*, and the violence of terrorism: the first is the soil from which the second grows. And I've argued that there should be no further religious-based opt-outs from British law.

But this second strategic option is unpersuasive. I'm all for locking up people convicted of terrorist offences. But I'm not convinced that the best antidote to violent extremism is liberal secularism. If government is to hold that religion in general is a problem – a habit that, like smoking, is bad for your health, and is to be tolerated only in private, if at all – it must surely move towards, say, cutting off all state support from faith schools, removing all tax breaks from religious-based charities and, eventually, scrapping the Coronation Service. You can make your own judgement about whether such courses of action are more or less likely to lower school standards, remove support from vulnerable people, offload new burdens on the taxpayer, damage civil society, harm the current quest for shared values and dent our common sense of Britishness. I've already made mine.

But - it will be said - Islam is different. We all know the charge-sheet. I'm not an expert on Islam (neither, incidentally, are most of the people who recite the charge sheet) but I know enough to appreciate that some of it is trumped up. There's no traditional Islamic sanction for female circumcision or honour killings. These are cultural practices, not religious ones, also to be found among many peoples who aren't Muslims at all.

Ah, the objection comes back, but what about the hudud punishment code and bans on conversion? What about – since this is an audience with an interest in the arts – the Rushdie affair and the Danish cartoons? What about Islam’s alleged inability to separate the sacred from the secular, its apparent need for a Reformation and Enlightenment?

Now, as I say, I’m not an expert on Islam, but mainstream Islamic scholars counter that, in practice, it’s very rare for Islamic religious authorities to govern: indeed, the only two present-day countries that claim to be full sharia states are Iran and Saudi Arabia, neither of which are seen by most Muslims as models to follow. This helps to explain why the hudud punishments aren’t fully implemented in most Islamic or Muslim-majority states, which operate a mixture of state, sharia and customary law. These scholars go on to point out that in the original Islamic religious settlement – the Constitution of Medina – Muslims were a minority, and that there’s no shortage of models for Muslims in relation to living as a minority, either in practice (they cite the early Muslim experience in western China) or in the Koran (they cite the story of Joseph).

As I keep saying, I’m not expert enough to sift these claims. But like everyone else, I have my prejudices. One of these is that religion, viewed from a sociological angle, is whatever people make of it. Parts of the Old Testament are full of blood and fire, but they’re not most of Judaism. The New Testament was sometimes imposed on the point of an imperialist sword, but this story isn’t most of Christianity. And the West’s progress through reformation and enlightenment wasn’t a pain-free pageant of Whig history. At least three million people died in the Thirty Years War. The French Revolution and the Napoleon’s wars were arguably by-products of the Enlightenment. The West should be proud of its democratic heritage. But pride shouldn’t be confused with triumphalism. Progress to modern democracy in Europe took centuries. We shouldn’t expect it to happen overnight in the Middle East.

The Ramadan controversy, the defection of Maajid Nawaz from Hizb-ut-Tahrir, Ed Husain's "The Islamist", and the emergence of such relatively new groups as Muslims for Secular Democracy, the City Circle and the Quilliam Foundation are all domestic reminders that Islam, too, viewed from a sociological angle, is what its practitioners make of it. Worldwide debate and discussion are taking place within it about its relationship with the modern world – as within other religions. The recent letter from 38 Muslim scholars to the Pope may be a sign of this.

We don't know how this internal debate will turn out. We do know, however, that there are strands within Islam that many in the West have found attractive for a very long time. As exacting a scholar as Bernard Lewis has said: "Sufism is remarkable. It offers something better than tolerance. The attitude to people of other religions exhibited in Sufi writings is without parallel. It is acceptance. There are poems by Rumi, by Ibn Arabi in Persian and Turkish which indicate that all religions are basically the same: all religions have the same purpose, the same message, the same communication and the same God. They may do so in different ways, but God is equally there in church, in mosque, and in synagogue. It seems to me" – Lewis wrote – "that the notion of acceptance as distinct from mere tolerance is a profoundly important contribution and one which can still play a great role in establishing better relations between communities in the present time and in the future."

Now, I'm not dewy-eyed about Sufism. Sufis aren't pacifists, and opposed moves towards relative tolerance and liberality in their time. Nor is Sufism the only strand in Islam that's amenable to modern western thinking. But it helps to demonstrate why the assimilation option is wrong. Most of my Muslim constituents are from a broadly Sufi – specifically Barelwi – Islamic background. They would rightly feel insulted were they to be told that their religion was somehow less

tolerant than, say, Christianity or Judaism, or is any less an integral part of modern Britain.

This leads me, inevitably, to the third strategic option – integration.

Now there are clearly many aspects to integration. I want to address only one of them this evening. Assimilation implies absorption and, eventually, disappearance. Integration implies exchange.

Only three per cent of Britain's population is Muslim. As time goes by, this proportion will rise – a third of it is under sixteen, compared to a fifth of the rest of the population – and it will tend to be concentrated in particular parts of urban and suburban areas.

None the less, the overwhelming majority of Britain's future population will not be Muslim. It obviously won't – and shouldn't – be willing to accept the writing of special legal provision for Muslims into British law, whether these are formal Sharia jurisdictions in whole areas or simply opt-outs from the laws that govern, say, inheritance and divorce. Such provision would harm community cohesion irrevocably, and violate the principle of equality before the law.

So if integration implies exchange, and if further special legal provisions for any religious group are out, what's the nature of any exchange involving British Muslims?

I believe it's as follows: that non-Muslims should make Britain a warm home for mainstream Islam, and that Muslims, like other religious communities, should root out support for separatism and extremism within their communities. This mutual bargain is essentially an unwritten social contract – one of many in today's Britain. You don't need me to tell you that a

very great deal hangs on the success of this one – including, perhaps, the domestic struggle against Al Qaeda.

The rooting-out of extremism and separatism takes me back to the young man whose story I began with. Wouldn't a better end to his story be neither applause for a martyr nor revulsion at a terrorist, but if he, and others like him, don't turn to extremism and terrorism in the first place?

While there are no easy or guaranteed means of ensuring this, I've come to believe that if young Muslim men know more about their own religion they are less likely to be drawn on to the conveyer belt to terrorism. In other words, one of the problems we face isn't that there's too much mainstream Islam among Britain's Muslim communities, but too little.

I can already hear the objections to this line of thinking. It will be argued that it isn't the business of Government to back mainstream Islam with taxpayers' money, and that politicians shouldn't try to pick winners from religions about which they're not necessarily well informed.

As it happens, this Government is in that business already. It's spending some £70 million over the next three years on projects that will essentially help build mainstream Islamic capacity. Given the scale of the challenge from separatism and extremism, we've supported these programmes in principle – though we intend of course to keep a close eye on where the money's actually going.

However, my aim this evening isn't to propose spending more taxpayers' money. Rather, it's to suggest how government could use the energies of its Ministers, the range of its contacts, its power in relation to public institutions, its clout abroad and whatever prestige it still enjoys at home to grow support for mainstream Islam among our Muslim communities – especially through the private, voluntary and independent sectors.

Here are a number of ideas, in no particular order.

First of all, our politicians, policy makers and opinion formers clearly know less about Islam and Islamism than they might. France has a specialised research unit within its Foreign Ministry. We abolished our equivalent in 2002. Would a small college to educate these groups about trends in modern Islam be out of place?

Moving on, it's commonplace for organisations to bid for funds for specific projects. Shouldn't Government encourage its contacts to give private money to suitable charities or foundations which would in turn grant funds to, say, a mosque seeking to a well-qualified, English-speaking Imam the kind of salary that would not only attract him to the job, but keep him in it; or to an education project that brings pupils from different schools and religions together, or to a madrassa curriculum for children that seeks – as some are now doing – to demonstrate a Koranic basis for our common way of life?

]

It's worth mentioning at this point that my colleague Sayeedi Warsi has rightly challenged mainstream Muslims themselves to set up local networks of activists that could help counsel young Muslims who are themselves vulnerable to extremists.

Moving on again, my sense is that separatists and extremists are adept at constructing a grand narrative of perpetual conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims by the manipulation of Islamic texts, and running bookshops on site or online that produce books, tapes, DVDs, films and lectures in English that hammer out simple and repetitious messages of confrontation, hatred and anger – based on these narrow readings.

My sense also is that mainstream Islamic religious institutions and scholars have been less adept to date. Most Muslims – like most people of other religions – are not consumed by politics. They're trying, rather, to hold down their jobs, raise their families, live their lives, practice their religion – and who can blame them? But they're now facing the potential loss of at least part of their next generation to extremism and separatism. So an organised response to both is beginning to take shape.

None the less, on simple messages, there seems to be a gap in the market for a mainstream Islamic publisher who offers clear, simple and Islam-based material, in English, that rebuts extremist claims, and advances the case for shared values and our common democratic settlement. Is there nothing that government can do to stimulate the emergence of such an enterprise?

On a grand narrative, Britain's Universities contain many mainstream Islamic scholars, some of whom are translating classic Islamic texts into English. They're among the domestic Muslims best placed to help construct an over-arching narrative of modern European Islam that would marry Islamic teaching and western democracy – a narrative that would give shape and force to the more simple material I referred to a moment ago. Some may already be doing this in a structured way. But again, is there nothing that Ministers can do give such a project more shape and impetus – of assisting the creation, say, of a new privately-funded Institute for British Islam, whose mission would be to help create the narrative to which I'm pointing?

Moving on, there's justifiable concern about radicalisation towards extremism in prisons and in universities. Shouldn't Ministers encourage the creation of local boards which could put these institutions in touch with mainstream Islamic teachers and scholars from the relevant areas?

Turning to schools, up to 2.3 million inhabitants of the old Imperial India fought for Britain during the last World War. Over 30,000 people died and over 60,000 were wounded. Many of these soldiers were Muslims. Some of their friends and relatives, and indeed some of the soldiers themselves, live in Britain today. A project on the contribution which Muslims made to the struggle against totalitarianism has been carried out in my local area – with obvious resonances for the present day. Shouldn't such projects be encouraged by government on a larger scale?

To expand the theme, British Muslims have of course fought for their country far more recently – such as Jabron Hashmi, who died fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan. His family described him as “a committed soldier. He was fiercely proud of being British...He went to Afghanistan hoping to build bridges between the east and the west. He always wanted to serve his country since he was a little boy”. Each individual story will always involve family sensitivities. But isn't there more that Ministers could do, however discreetly, in relation to the emergence of role models?

Finally, it's far from clear that the Government's thinking on all these issues is joined-up. I'll spare this audience the journey from the Preventing Extremism Together project, post 7/7, through Tony Blair tearing up this strategy less than six months later, without consulting his Ministers, to announce his own 12-point plan to the Government's present dispersal of responsibilities across at least three major Departments of State. I'll simply ask one question. If the DCLG is the lead Department on preventing violent extremism, why is the intellectual heavy lifting apparently being carried out by a Research, Information and Communications Unit within the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism?

Now I've tried this evening to describe the route that might divert young people from taking the same appalling road as

Hasib Hussain, the 7/7 bomber, or Mukhtar Said Ibrahim, or Antony Garcia or Richard Reid – as well as perhaps giving them a glimpse of something better. I'm extremely conscious that set against the sweeping panorama of the struggle against extremism, the ideas that I've tried to describe are extremely small-scale. But then again, big things sometimes have small beginnings.

ends