

Crucible: The Christian journal of social ethics devoted its July-September 2008 number to “Islam in Britain: challenge and opportunity”. The following article was written by Chris Hewer. It explores some of the key social values that Islam might have to contribute to the future of British society without doing the work of Muslim scholars in addressing their tradition and working out the application in detail.

The contribution of Islamic social values to the future of British society

Setting the scene

The 2001 Census gave the Muslim population of Britain as approximately 1.6m people. There are reasons to think that this might have been rather a low figure and, with the passage of nearly seven years, we can reasonably estimate the current total to be in the order of 2 million. The key statistic that the last census produced was the age profile of Muslims in Britain. Whereas 31% of the total population is aged under 25 years, the corresponding figure for Muslims is 52% (Sikhs 42% and Hindus 37%). Similarly, 21% of the total population is aged over 65 years, compared to 6% of Muslims (Sikhs 9% and Hindus 11%). If 52% of the Muslim population is aged under 25, then it is obvious that over the next couple of decades, they are going to be of an age to marry and have families; similarly, if only 6% are aged over 65, then it will take the same couple of decades for a large enough cohort to become old enough to die of natural causes. The result of both these extrapolations is that the Muslim population of Britain, together with the Sikh and Hindu populations pro rata, will significantly increase over the next couple of decades before it reaches demographic stability. We need to factor into our thinking that only a proportion of these Muslims will seek to implement Islamic teaching in their lives; others may well have only a nominal affiliation. It is important in passing to note that we are speaking of British citizens exercising their human right of having families and not immigration, asylum seekers, refugees or mass conversions, all these will play a statistically insignificant role by comparison.

My sense of British and indeed European society over the first half of the current century is that we will go through major social change, in which the age profiles of many countries, coupled with changed economic circumstances, will mean that the post-war social welfare system in which most of us grew up will need to be overhauled. We have already experienced the situation in which young people in London and the South East, at least, can no longer afford to get onto the property-owning ladder. We speak as yet in hushed tones about the crisis of pension provision. We are aware that there are developing tensions of provision in health care, caring for the elderly, education and employment. The government's own talk about community cohesion is an indicator that there are areas of potential unrest in urban areas. My contention is that the post-war social welfare systems in Europe grew out of the social values of Christianity and Judaism, combined with the social conscience growing from the European humanist and egalitarian experiences of the 19th and 20th centuries. The challenge that I want to explore is what earthly use Islam, and the other minority faiths, might be in contributing their social values to the discussion on what kind of a society we want to shape in Britain and Europe in the 21st century. I work on the

assumption that one of the roles to be played by religious communities in a liberal democracy like Britain is to hold up a social prophetic mirror to society and ask if what we have today is really the best way for human life to be lived.

Islam is quite clear that the Qur'an offers guidance on human living for the whole of humankind and not just for a discrete group of people who identify themselves as Muslims.¹ Similarly, the Qur'an makes clear that the Prophet Muhammad is a blessing for all the worlds and not just an exemplary role model for his Muslim followers.² Therefore, the guidance of the Qur'an and the lived example of Muhammad are the properties of all human beings, and not the sole preserve of the Muslims. As Islamic social values are drawn from these two sources, then we can all rightly claim them as a contribution to the discussion about what it is to be a fully human being and to live in a human society, and expect our Muslim fellow citizens to join in that discussion from a sense of duty and shared citizenship. What follows in this paper is a description of some aspects of Islamic social ethics, which are often ideals in search of realisation in Muslim societies around the world but which I hope can contribute to the ongoing debate about the future of British society. As this article is written by a Christian student of Islam, it has been passed to several Muslim colleagues for comment and criticism in the process of writing³.

Khalifa

Every human being is called to be the Regent of God (*khalifa*) on earth.⁴ In this capacity we are to cherish and develop the earth so that it is brought to and maintained in its full potential. The human being is the steward of the earth and all its goods, rather than the consumer or exploiter.⁵ This gives the human being the natural responsibility for ecology and protecting the environment in which we live.⁶ Just as men and women, acting as the *khalifa*, have developed the full beauty of varieties of roses, the utility of breeds of dogs or the character traits of domesticated animals, so must we also face the questions of gene technology or advances in medical procedures. Muslim scholars are required to work on the ethics that apply in such circumstances. Discussion goes on amongst Muslims about their responsibilities in global warming or the extravagant consumption of people in developed countries. It is not just in the physical world that one must exercise the responsibility of being the *khalifa* but also in the social order. We are required to build a just society that reflects the divine plan for the way that we should live. The relationship between a just social order and care for the environment would be two dimensions of the same social conscience from a Muslim perspective.

¹ Q. 81: 27

² Q. 33:21, 45-46

³ Not much has yet been written by Muslims in Europe on this theme but I draw attention to Tariq Ramadan's book, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Oxford: OUP, 2004.

⁴ Q. 2:30

⁵ Q. 31:20

⁶ See Khalid, Fazlun with Joanne O'Brien, *Islam and Ecology*, London: Cassell, 1992, and Foltz, R.C. et al. (eds), *Islam and Ecology*, Harvard: HUP, 2003. Fazlun Khalid was the founder of IFEES (Islamic Foundation for Ecology & Environmental Sciences), who's home page can be found on www.ifees.org.uk.

Shura

There is no hierarchy or magisterium within the Islamic system. Every individual has the responsibility under God, within the bounds of their intellect and knowledge, to discern and reason out God's guidance for the creation. This gives the basis of consultation (*shura*) and seeking consensus (*ijma*) within the Muslim concept of society. As this is a responsibility that devolves to every single individual, then we have here the root for a democratic system within Islam; not that the people are sovereign in their own right to make whatever laws a majority decides, but rather that every individual must accept the responsibility to seek and implement divine guidance in social matters.⁷ There are of course loci of authority within Islam, but individuals who hold authority and command respect do so on account of their piety and wisdom. Scholars accept the responsibility to train the next generation and eventually give their students permission to teach, and thus to be guides to humanity. This is seen pre-eminently in the Shi'a system, where an Ayatollah, literally a "sign of God", is someone who has reached such a level of piety and wisdom that he/she can be a model for emulation by those less knowledgeable. Each human being, possessed of freewill and therefore the correlative capacity for rebellion and disobedience, must seek out and implement the divine guidance.⁸ Consequently, there is the Day of Reckoning, when God the Almighty Judge will call every human being to render an account of their stewardship. This sense of a life hereafter and judgement gives Muslims the ability to cope with inequality and injustice, which must always be resisted and opposed, but ultimately the one who suffers unjustly in this life may await their reward from God in the next.⁹ Thus one struggles always towards the perfect but has the capacity to live with imperfection for the time being.

Education

From the foregoing it must be clear that Islam has traditionally always placed a high value on education. It is the duty of every man and woman to seek knowledge wherever it may be found. As the Prophet put it, "Knowledge is the lost property of the seeker". This applies equally to men and women; there is no room within Islam for sexual discrimination in the right and duty to seek an education. The Qur'an on several occasions counsels an attitude of seeking, questioning and investigation until things become clear. Muslims in the Golden Age of Islam were great scholars, inventors and practical scientists in a wide range of disciplines. The creation is a deposit of revelation in which one may read the signs of God, and thus Muslims pride themselves on being open to investigation and rational argument.¹⁰ To be a teacher is a highly respected profession in Muslim societies; one who is responsible for guiding the youth in their quest for knowledge. However, knowledge must always be integrated into life. The students have the right to see the fruits of the teacher's knowledge in the teacher's life and behaviour. There is no room for "do as I say but

⁷ See Sachedina, Abdulaziz, *The Islamic roots of democratic pluralism*, Oxford: OUP, 2001; Soroush, Abdolkarim, *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam*, Oxford: OUP, 2000; Enayat, Hamid, *Modern Islamic political thought*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2005.

⁸ Q. 91:7-10

⁹ Q. 36:48-65, 37:16-33

¹⁰ Q. 6:98-99, 105

not as I do” in Islam; rather “if you believed the truth of what you’re teaching, then we would see you seeking to implement it yourself”.¹¹ The archetype here is the Prophet Muhammad himself, who lived out the message in such a way that he made the Qur’an manifest in his own life.¹² The history of Islam is full of men and women committing their lives to the pursuit of knowledge, of people travelling great distances at considerable personal effort, to seek an education with a particular scholar, and of those who had made some money endowing a library, school or other centre of learning so that future generations would benefit from their good fortune.

Family

One of the most profound social revolutions brought about by the Prophet Muhammad in Arab society in his time was to make the family the central unit of society. Before his time, Arab men had not taken responsibility for their womenfolk or their offspring and there was little concept of sexual fidelity. With the coming of Islam, the man and woman must both freely and publicly commit themselves to each other in marriage. It then becomes the husband’s responsibility to support his wife and children, under God’s providence. So critical is marriage within the Islamic social system that the Prophet said “marriage is half your religion”. It is the seedbed of virtues such as patience, trust in God, God-consciousness, self-sacrifice, thankfulness and the blessing of children to rear in the way of Islam. The training of character in young children is an essential part, no “waiting until they are old enough to choose” but rather the new born baby has the call to prayer whispered into the ear as a sign that one is born Muslim and to live a Muslim life is one’s birthright and vocation. Preserving the exclusive bond of marriage is central to Islamic society. Sexual activity outside of marriage is forbidden and unfaithfulness within marriage can ultimately be a capital offence, but with such a high threshold of proof that it can rarely be reached.¹³ Islam stresses the right of every child to know the identity of their birth parents and this has implications for anonymous adoption and artificial insemination by donor. When a couple marry, they take on the wider family responsibilities of their partner; it is not just the marriage of two individuals but a union of two families. From now on the couple have responsibilities within the extended families on both sides. This would of course include the care of the elderly, widows and orphans, making provision for any sick or handicapped members, and providing a social support network to help out other members of the families who are in difficulties through debt, misfortune, sickness, unemployment and so forth. There is no room within the Islamic system for clans, tribes, racial groupings and so on; the next social unit after the family is the *umma* the world-wide community of Muslims that links each believer into a geographical solidarity with Muslims all over the world today but also into a temporal unity with earlier and later generations.¹⁴ This solidarity is expressed in the formal five-times-a-

¹¹ Q. 61:2-3

¹² There is a famous saying attributed to one of Muhammad’s wives to the effect that if one wanted to know the contents of the Qur’an, then one should look at the life of the Prophet, and if one wanted to know the Prophet’s character, then one should read the Qur’an.

¹³ Q. 24:2-4

¹⁴ When Muslims all over the world turn in prayer towards the *ka’ba* in Makka (Q. 2:144), it is the geographical solidarity that comes to mind, but as the prayers are timed by the rising and setting of the sun, there is never a moment at which Muslims are not turning towards the *ka’ba* in prayer, this day, this year, this century and right

day prayers in which people line up together shoulder to shoulder, so one is aware of the other at prayer and that they have rights over one, and in rows that fill completely before the next row is started, irrespective of the social class, education, wealth or status of any individual.

Work

Work for the Muslim is the way of engaging with the created order, whether physical or social, to put the guidance of God into practice. Work is the natural outworking of being the *khalifa*. Types of employment that help to build up society, e.g. teaching, law, medicine, permitted forms of business, are to be encouraged, whereas anything that involves prohibited activities or exploitation is forbidden. There is a strong ethical principle that anything that is forbidden for a Muslim to do, it is also forbidden for a Muslim to profit by someone else doing it, e.g. it is forbidden to consume alcohol, thus it is also forbidden to trade in it or to invest in a distillery. This has significant consequences for the ethical screening of investments by pension, savings and investment funds. Employers must not exploit their employees; following the saying of the Prophet that labourers must be paid their wages before their sweat dries on their foreheads. Muhammad taught a principle of self-help for those in need, so when a beggar came to him in the market place asking for bread for his family, Muhammad bought him an axe so that he could go and cut firewood and sell it in the market, thus feeding his family by his own efforts every day. When Muhammad arrived in Madina with the Makkans who had migrated with him, they were in fact refugees and some had lost everything by their move. The Makkans were traders and had no skill in the farming life of Madina. The Prophet paired off a Makkan migrant with one of the Muslims from Madina, who shared his land and expertise with the newcomer, so that both could find a way to feed their families in the new Muslim community that was being formed. One can trace the honourable record of refugees being taken in by Muslim societies in history, e.g. Jews fleeing persecution by Christians in Europe, and also in the present circumstances of the world, although today the vast majority of displaced people worldwide are Muslim.¹⁵ Part of being the *khalifa* is the realisation that what we appear to own is only placed in our hands on trust to be used in the way of God, who is the rightful owner. This is typified in the economic principle of *infaq* or the circulation of wealth. Those with wealth beyond the needs of their family, and having made provision for eventualities, should use that surplus money for the upbuilding of society without any element of control or personal reward, e.g. a business start-up grant could be made to a group of artisans, to enable them to equip a workshop and thus to become economically active, serve society and support their families with dignity. This would not be a loan to be repaid or an investment in the hope of return, but rather a sharing of the good things of the earth according to the way of God, who will reward in this life or the next as God knows best. Similar ethical norms are to be found in trading: it is forbidden to wait until produce is about to go bad before buying it, in the hope of driving down a fair price, and it is forbidden to

back through the generations and onwards into the future, the *umma* is a timeless bond with Muslims of this and all ages.

¹⁵ One need only look at the estimated two million Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the millions of Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan.

store up goods that are needed, to create a shortage, in the hope of driving up the price that people are willing to pay; both would be forms of economic exploitation.

Justice

One of the names by which God is known in the Qur'an is *al-'Adl*, the Just One. Justice without favouritism is one of the cardinal virtues of Islam.¹⁶ There is a verse of the Qur'an which commands, "Do justice, even if it goes against yourself". Similarly, the Prophet was asked to show favour in judging a case and responded by saying that even if the accused were his own daughter Fatima, he would judge her with justice the same as anyone else; thus justice must be blind to factors such as status, blood ties or family honour. The severest warnings are given in the Qur'an against those who would act unjustly in inheritance or guardianship towards orphans or widows. True repentance and seeking forgiveness requires that the offender acknowledges the offence and seeks to make recompense, this might mean significant financial support for the victim of a crime. There is in Islam the idea of an exemplary punishment, that through the punishment of one individual others may know right from wrong and learn the consequences of wrong doing, so that one punishment may be seen to discourage others and make the punishment of many unnecessary. Although human beings are basically good, Muslims are clear that the undisciplined human heart is prone to forgetfulness and thus to waywardness. We are required "to promote the good and forbid the evil" within society. There is no room for disengaged *laissez faire* but rather evil must be engaged, overcome and eradicated from human affairs. This is a constant struggle, first of all within oneself to fight against one's own waywardness; this is the core meaning of the word *jihad*, to struggle and strive against evil, forgetfulness of God and one's own base inclinations.¹⁷ This is of course carried on into wider society, where evil and oppression must be resisted too, if all else fails, by the legitimate use of limited force under the appropriate legally constituted ruler. We have been witness to a falsely framed question, which amounts almost to a canard, about whether Muslim loyalties are first to God or to the laws of the state. Muslims, like Christians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Thomas More, would want to obey the civil law in all things Godly, but ultimately the Muslim, like the Christian, is God's servant first, and if necessary must object in conscience to an unjust law, even if, like More and Bonhoeffer, they must pay the ultimate price of imprisonment and even execution for their obedience. We have seen the way in which many Muslims in Britain have "come of age" in terms of political compromise to campaign in the Stop the War Coalition alongside fellow citizens, with whom they have this cause in common, even though on a host of other issues there may be serious disagreement.

Economics

The principles behind our society are often made plain in our economic life. The fundamental economic principle of Islam is *sadaqa*, which is often simply translated as charity but is better rendered as "bearing one another's burdens". This is reinforced in many teachings of Muhammad, such as "He is not a Muslim who goes to bed with a

¹⁶ Q. 16:90; 4:135

¹⁷ Q. 13:11

full stomach whilst his neighbour goes to bed hungry” and “You have not put the first step on the way of faith until you wish for your neighbour all the good that you wish for yourself”.¹⁸ This is a natural outpouring of the overriding principle that everything belongs to God and is only given to us on trust; therefore it is to be used according to God’s guidance. Hospitality, coming to the relief of those in distress and sharing burdens is endemic in traditional Muslim society. There are many reports from the Ottoman Empire of people having to travel great distances trying to find a poor person whose needs had not been met and to whom charity could be given. *Sadaqa* includes lending money to those in need, but without taking advantage of their situation, therefore without interest. Of course the principle was developed in an inflation-free economy where money retained its value, but all forms of *riba* (usury, lending money at interest, economic exploitation) are detested in Islam. Money can only make more money when it is exposed to a proportionate share of risk. For example, instead of the bank advancing capital secured on the assets of the person, which is protected in case of business collapse, money must be advanced in the form of a share in the equity, therefore the capital is at risk in the same way as the lender’s endeavour and labour.

Conclusion

In a post-colonial world dominated by globalisation, it is hard to conceive of what a truly Islamic modern social order might look like in a Muslim majority country, let alone to find it in practice. Like the old excuse of communism and Christianity, one can say “it’s never been tried”, although there are interesting examples in historical Islamic empires. The key question for us is not what would Britain look like if it were run on Islamic social values, but rather what do those values touched on briefly above have to contribute to the discussion about the future of British society shaped by many faith traditions, philosophies, cultures and the aspirations of the people. “To practise one’s religion is to participate in the social endeavour, and so there can be no religious consciousness without a social ethic.”¹⁹ We need to give encouragement to Muslim scholars to delve into their treasury of wisdom to see what they have there to contribute to the discussion about the future of British society.

¹⁸ Q. 3:92

¹⁹ Ramadan, op. cit., p. 149