

Building new Medinas in these sceptred isles

Let me start by saying how inspiring it is to meet so many fellow converts and I hope that this can be a spiritually uplifting day for all of us. I believe this is also a day for honest discussion. I'm afraid I'm going to be quite forthright today about a lot of issues that are rarely discussed and which all too often get covered over by an easy rhetoric about unity and brotherhood which deliberately masks any serious attempt to address some of the real divisions that divide converts themselves and converts from born Muslims.

Convert Stereotypes

Our most serious task, is seeking the good pleasure of God, for all human beings have been created for His worship in order to know Him. But under the ambit of this universal goal, what particular contribution do converts have to make in 21st century Britain? With the many pressures that accompany conversion, we can often define ourselves—or allow ourselves to be defined—as marginal, even irrelevant. We are potentially castigated as doubly marginal: as those who have betrayed Western liberalism yet who are mere children or tokens in the House of Islam.

There is still too much discreet Muslim prejudice against converts, who are sometimes seen as having little to contribute except a sort of Caucasian tokenism in glossy brochures for raising money in the Middle East. We are primarily categorised by our 'Westernness', as a few shiny pieces of silverware, who are paraded as hard-won trophies for the faith at a time when Western cultural, economic, military and political influence appears ever more pervasive around the world. When McDonalds has

arrived in Mecca, is not the temptation too great to point out that a handful of Westerners pray in that direction too?

And are we always to be defined as neophytes, as newcomers to the faith? According to the current stereotype, the inimitable 'Umar al-Faruq, may God be well pleased with him, would have been categorised a mere 'new' Muslim for life. I would like to see this condescending adjective dropped. We cannot be forever defined by our initial conversion, for the *shahadatayn* is just the first witnessing in a life-long journey towards God. Indeed, many of our prominent convert intellectuals and scholars have been derided in private and occasionally in public as eccentric, out of touch, unreliable and even suspect, which is all based on a sort of inverse-'superiority complex' that is a hangover from the colonial past. Thus, according to this attitude, no matter what their achievements, converts are excluded from the circle of the trusted, the responsible and those of serious piety.

Thus whether as novice or trophy, the convert appears overburdened equally with low or high expectations, which mirror the simultaneous admiration, envy and distrust with which Muslims often regard the West.

I'd like to now turn to Western attitudes towards converts. We are—all too often—seen as freaks who have made an incomprehensible choice that might be explained away as eccentricity, the insincere by-product of a marriage, the outcome of psychological crisis or disorder, social maladaptation or naive sympathy for the latest form of Third Worldism. All these common stereotypes are largely the outcome of a thor-

oughly secular worldview that sees religion as the irrational, superstitious 'other' to itself, and it must therefore explain away any serious religious commitment as a cipher for some personal or political discontent.

But if we are not villains then we are not automatic heroes either. It can be tempting to fall for the easy compliment we often get that we converts are serious about our faith in a way that born Muslims are not. This can lead to a dangerous sense of false superiority on the part of those who choose over those who allegedly only inherit. But if 'actions are by intentions', as the famous Prophetic tradition runs, then it is curious that we rarely analyse our motives for conversion, a supreme act, either at the time or in retrospect. Only the forsaken of God think themselves above self-criticism (*muhasaba*) and the need to turn back to God with contrition (*tawba*) by sole virtue of the act of conversion. We cannot, therefore, presume an unthinking superiority over those born into the faith. We ought to recognise as well that any born Muslim who takes or who decides to take their faith seriously has made a choice that is just as self-conscious and committed as any true act of conversion.

It is arguable that since the period of mass Muslim migration to Britain in the 1950s, converts, caught in this double marginality, have lost their cultural self confidence and their ability to define an autochthonous Islam at ease with itself, of an authentic religiosity at home with deeply-rooted British traditions and sensibilities. Where, might we ask, are the Pickthalls and Quilliams of today? I think the reasons are clear. The advent of the pioneer generation of mostly New

Commonwealth Muslim migrants, who saw their faith as part of a religio-cultural complex, radically changed popular perceptions about what constituted normative Islam in Britain. In their view, their ethnicity and homeland nationality were inextricably bound up with their Islam. Thereafter, the second and third generations have been busy untying this connection as part of their adjustment to life in Britain. Whether it is a fidelity to the Sunna stripped of all culture, a violent politically-motivated rejection of all things Western, or an unquestioning adoption of British norms over supposedly inferior Sub-Continental peasant ones, these approaches share the premise that religion opposes culture.

But this is a truism rather than truth. In fact, as Abdal-Hakim Murad has often pointed out, faith without cultural packaging is effectively naked. Classical jurisprudence assumes, unlike the current Salafi view, that matters are basically permissible unless there is a proof to the contrary, a license that covers the vast majority of human acts. The definition of what is halal to eat or what is legally modest has not prevented huge cultural diversity in cuisine and dress in the Muslim world. So we do not therefore have to return to a cultureless Year Zero to become true Muslims. No doubt over generations, some sort of composite British Islamic culture will emerge, but in the meantime, we British Muslims need to feel comfortable with our cultural and ethnic diversity—and there are many emerging opportunities to do this.

Cultural Signposts

Here perhaps converts can play a useful role as cultural signposts, whose double marginality may in fact be seen as a virtue in a more cosmopolitan future. What do I mean by this? The cultures of the so-called *kuffar* (infidels) belong to us; they are the ones we grew up with.

I say 'so-called' here because no one may be called a kafir (an ingrate, one who conceals the truth, or who denies God and His favour and benefit) if he or she rejects Islam out of ignorance or from a distorted view of Islam, as

Imam Ghazali argues. In fact, such people are innocent and will not be punished in the next life. God says: We do not punish until We send a Messenger. (17:15)

So to continue with my theme, we act as cultural signposts simply because we have to live day-to-day with the realisation that the Islamic paradigm absorbs all cultures—in all times

THERE IS STILL TOO MUCH DISCREET MUSLIM PREJUDICE AGAINST CONVERTS, WHO ARE SOMETIMES SEEN AS HAVING LITTLE TO CONTRIBUTE EXCEPT A SORT OF CAUCASIAN TOKENISM IN GLOSSY BROCHURES FOR RAISING MONEY IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

and places—in accordance with its universal norm. But this is a universality that embraces rather than rejects cultural diversity. So perhaps in this process, we converts can be the trailblazers who first domesticate Anglo traits, eccentricities and foibles to the Islamic norm.

Callers to God

Secondly, as is now commonly asserted by all, we converts have to take a lead in inviting our own people to the faith. This is rightfully in line with the Way (Sunna) of God, who sent the Prophets to their own peoples. I would argue that at the present time, with honourable exceptions, British Muslims are psychologically incapable of giving da'wa. For those focused on global inequalities, the West is currently the enemy, and all Westerners are in some indirect way culpable in the foreign policy sins of their governments. Thus these Muslims—in their not unjustified anger—want to tell them off. They want to talk about geopolitics not God.

Let me now cite a few recent examples that highlight the difference between Muslims overwhelmed by their suffering and those who have retained their dignity through their trust in the Divine providence, and the impact that these contrasting behaviours make on non-Muslim observers.

Enraged at being the targets

of destructive B52 bombing, Robert Fisk wrote movingly about how Afghan refugees set upon him last December when his car broke down in a border camp. One young boy asked in all seriousness if this white man was George Bush. But fearing for his life, after a savage beating, Fisk was saved by a saintly old man with a turban and a white-

to destroy the town at his command. But the Blessed Prophet Up demurred, saying, 'Even if these people do not accept Islam, I have trust in God that there will be those from among their progeny who would worship God and serve His cause.' Even grander was the Blessed Prophet's *ʿĒ* forbearance (*kilm*) at the moment of his triumphal return to Mecca. After the destruction of the idols, the Blessed Prophet *t&* told those who had humiliated, tortured and killed some of his family and Companions:

'O Quraysh, God has taken from you the haughtiness of paganism and its veneration of ancestors. Man springs from Adam and Adam sprang from dust.' Then he read to them from this verse: O men, We created you from male and female and made you into peoples and tribes that you may know one another: of a truth the most noble of you in God's sight is the most pious to the end of the passage. Then he added, 'O Quraysh, what do you think that I am about to do with you?' They replied, 'Good. You are a noble brother, son of a noble brother.' He said, 'Go your way for you are the freed ones.'

Thus the life of Blessed Prophet *jS/c* nobly demonstrates the principles of impartial justice and forgiveness and reconciliation. As the Qur'an says, let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve to wrong and depart from justice (5:8). Many Muslims still retain that ethic despite great suffering. Covering the brutal effects of economic sanctions on Iraq, Australian journalist John Pilger comments that:

'During three weeks in Iraq, only once was I the brunt of someone's anguish. 'Why are you killing the children?' shouted a man on the street. 'Why are you bombing us? What have we done to you?' Passers-by moved quickly to calm him; one of them placed an affectionate arm on his shoulder, another, a teacher, materialised at my side. 'We do not connect the people of Britain with the actions of the government,' he said, reassuringly. Those Muslims in Britain, terrified to leave their homes after the bombing of Afghanistan, have little of the personal security I felt in Iraq.'

When those who are directly

grey beard who looked like 'an old Testament figure or some Bible story, the Good Samaritan, a Muslim man', who led this journalist to safety. Fisk, exceptionally, understood the rage, when most non-Muslims would not have done:

'And—I realised—there were all the Afghan men and boys who had attacked me who should never have done so but whose brutality was entirely the product of others, of us—of we who had armed their struggle against the Russians and ignored their pain and laughed at their civil war and then armed and paid them again for the "War for Civilisation" just a few miles away and then bombed their homes and ripped up their families and called them "collateral damage." [...] If I was an Afghan refugee in Kila Abdullah, I would have done just what they did. I would have attacked Robert Fisk. Or any other Westerner I could find.'

But Fisk was at a loss to understand the sanctity of those who kept their patience and helped. He merely voices astonishment.

We find the answer to this conundrum in the biography (*sira*) of the Blessed Prophet Sp. When he travelled, friendless, to Ta'if to call the people to God, he was humiliated, insulted and beaten. Finding refuge, he prayed and the angel Jibr'l (peace be upon him) appeared and offered

suffering from Western neo-imperialism show such sublime fortitude and retain a sense of proportion, how can we here in comfortable Britain dare to fall into an indiscriminate rage that stymies any prospect of impartial judgement?

There is yet another factor that also retards the emergence of a genuine spirit of da'wa. Identity politics has encouraged British Muslims to claim a meagre victimhood rather than fulfil their divine role as caretakers (*kbulafa'*) of the earth. So it is not surprising that British Muslims have with some justification pushed the Islamophobia agenda, especially since 1997. There is good reason for doing so given that British Muslims lack the basic legal protections afforded to other faith communities while by every major socio-economic indicator, they mostly head the list in terms of unemployment, bad housing, ill health, poor education, lack of political representation and discrimination in social provision. We converts should strive to share our cultural knowledge and professional skills in addressing these inequalities.

But let us remember that holding out our hands to receive makes sharing what we have—the pearl of faith—psychologically impossible. It might also fatally debar us from the treasure of *rahmaniyya*, the quality of mercy and justice to all of mankind. Those who strove most to bring Islam to the world did so in service of all, notably the Muslim mystics of Asia. Every day, at Ajmer in India, a huge amount of food has been continuously distributed to all—regardless of creed—since the sixteenth century, in memory of the great Muslim preacher and saint, Mu'inud-Din Chishti.

At the root of universal service and mercy is contentment in God and love of Him. How can sincere service to God and to His creatures truly come except through love of Him? The Blessed Prophet ﷺ said, 'Love God for the favours He grants you, and love me for the love of God, and love the people of my house for my love' and further that, 'God has said: "My love is due to those who love each other

for My sake, who sit with each other for My sake, who visit each other for My sake, and who give to each other for My sake.'"

Thus three insights essential to invitation to Islam are in danger of being effaced. Firstly we need to present Islam in a way that embraces and does not stigmatise Anglo culture. Secondly, we must emphasise the primary call to monotheism rather than get sidetracked into issues of current global or national inequality. These legitimate concerns are properly addressed elsewhere. Finally, we must regain that ethic of universal humanity, mercy and service to all through the love of God that was the hallmark of great inviters to Islam. As Rumi says, 'What is love? Perfect thirst. So let me explain the Water of Life.'

The great danger for converts and for born Muslims is the urge to systematise or formalise da'wa with reference to modern Protestant evangelism. But we should remember that they have little in common. Their way is bureaucratic, ours is organic; theirs is aggressive, ours is a polite invitation; theirs is based on money, ours on trust in the divine promise; theirs is a self-conscious mode of discourse, ours manifests itself from the depth of our spiritual state (*haal*). Our way is our mode of being, of who we are. We don't *do* da'wa, a ubiquitous phrase that reveals these subterranean evangelist influences, rather we submit at every moment in remembrance of God. For those who are interested, Thomas Arnold's excellent history *The Preaching of Islam* makes the difference between da'wa and mission abundantly clear.

I would suggest that converts, who remember what they used to be like in the old days, know that out there are fellow Britons who are curious, confused, alienated, open minded and who are looking to fill a deep spiritual emptiness. We remember more often than most that they have a fitra (the innate disposition that is attached to God). We have a unique role to play. So for all these reasons of cultural sensitivity and the need to avoid the political antagonisms that bedevil the Islam-West relationship, the

need for converts to work separately and collectively to invite towards God is obvious. I include here the sorts of sensible 'after-care' conversion services that converts have already organised separately in the UK.

The Merits of Separate Organisation

Let me pause here to address understandable fears about the separate organisation of Caucasian converts in particular. I single out Caucasians because I believe that Afro-Caribbean converts are much further ahead in forging a self-confident sense of their Islamic self that is underpinned by well-organised collective action. They have had giants like Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X to follow. We have had no comparable recent paragon of equal stature or cultural impact.

What has hung over Caucasian converts in the UK, for those with longer memories, is the bugbear of the Murabitun experience. Since the 1970s, this self-segregating convert group, despite its obvious successes with da'wa, has unfortunately sometimes fallen into abusive and frankly racist attitudes in its dealings with other Muslim ethnic groups in the UK.

Yet I must state bluntly that we have made the Murabitun experience a millstone around our necks, and this has retarded subsequent attempts at collective organisation. No other ethnicity considering self-organisation is so easily charged with the possibility of racism, when at the same time every other ethnic Muslim grouping in the UK legitimately comes together for a number of good purposes. What is the problem with this so long as one does not develop racist or exclusive attitudes that vitiate the universal brotherhood of Islam?

Let us pursue this matter further. Why indeed are white converts so easily tarred with the brush of racism? We still have the burden of our rapacious colonial past and now our current neo-imperialism to negotiate. But also, we can struggle to escape implicit notions of cultural or intellectual superiority that may persist after conversion. While it is essential to recover our British

Muslim past in order to gain a sense of rootedness and continuity, some of us may fall into a false reminiscence of English arcadia in which Islam is re-imagined as the reclamation of old Albion. In this hierarchical construct, born Muslims don't escape their allotted role as ex-colonial subjects. This reaction sometimes is an understandable if inexcusable one given that converts still encounter a rigid parochialism that pervades many British mosques. Once when I was travelling long distance from work, I stopped to pray in a strange mosque. Since I entered in a suit, the Mawlana teaching class immediately sent a pupil out to enquire if I had come on Council business. Such assumptions can be infuriating, but it is better to laugh them off, and it is never justified—no matter how disappointing one's experiences with British Muslims can sometimes be—to fall into racial stereotyping. Many born Muslims also have to shrug off their own racist preconceptions that Caucasians are forever entrapped in a superior mindset obsessed by the will to power.

I also now believe that getting together socially on occasion is very important. For years, I tried to avoid convert-only gatherings on the basis that they would be or could be dangerously exclusive and isolationist. But a few months ago, I spent a delightful evening in the company of two 'seasoned' convert brothers. I found it a liberating chance to just be British and Muslim, just be who I was without apology or explanation. It was a great relief. On reflection, I now think that we should take the chance to encourage such separate interaction for social reasons as well as working together in the pursuit of those goodly goals that are best served by converts working together.

With the proviso of tolerance, we may therefore make a splendid contribution with God's blessing to a new Medina in this green and pleasant land.

Yahya Bin

Trancript of a talk given at a gathering of converts in Bradford, 15 June 2002.