

Full text: Blair speech on Islam

Here is the full text of Tony Blair's speech to the "Islam and Muslims in the world today" conference in London on 4 June 2007:

🗣️ I would like to thank Cambridge University and their partners, the Coexist Foundation and the Weidenfeld Institute for Strategic Dialogue for hosting this important conference. As many of you will know, the Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme is at the forefront of innovative teaching and research in terms of the study of world religions, their inter-relations and their relations with secular society.

The first and most obvious question about this Conference here in London is: why? The first and most obvious answer is that Britain is today a country of two million Muslims in a Europe that has over 20 million Muslims. I would like to pay tribute to our British Muslim communities today. In overwhelming part, they make a significant positive and growing contribution to modern Britain.

We have successful Muslims in all areas of our national life - business, sport, media, culture, the professions. We have our first Muslim MPs, first Muslim Members of the House of Lords; hopefully the next election will bring more and hopefully also the first women Muslim MPs.

Secondly, and again obviously as a result of what is happening in the world today, there is an interest and appetite across all sections of society to know more about Islam in all its diversity. This is not, repeat not, about equating interest in Islam with anxiety over extremism. But it explains, in part, the desire to learn about what moves and motivates our Muslim communities.

However, most of all but less obviously, the reason for this conference is to allow the many dimensions of Islam to speak about themselves in a more considered, more profound way than the short bursts of news coverage normally permit. When I have met groups of Muslims, especially younger ones - and in any part of Britain - of course the normal issues about foreign policy arise.

But actually the predominant complaint is about how they believe their true faith is constantly hijacked and subverted by small, unrepresentative groups who get disproportionately large amounts of publicity.

It is the way of the modern media world that what counts is impact. Those willing to come on television and articulate extreme and violent views make so much more impact than those who use the still small voice of reason and moderation.

The principal purpose of this Conference therefore is to let the authentic voices of Islam, in their various schools and manifestations, speak for themselves.

Some of the most distinguished scholars and religious leaders the world over are gathered here. I ask people to listen to them. They are the authentic voices of Islam. The voices of extremism are no more representative of Islam than the use, in times gone by, of torture to force conversion to Christianity, represents the true teaching of Christ.

In doing this, there is yet another purpose: to reclaim from extremists, of whatever faith, the true essence of religious belief. In the face of so much high profile accorded to religious extremism, to schism, and to confrontation, it is important to show that religious faith is not inconsistent with reason, or progress, or the celebration of diversity. Round the world today, along with the images of violence, are the patient good works of people of different faiths coming together, understanding each other, respecting each other.

Religious faith has much to contribute to the public sphere; is still a thriving part of what makes a cohesive community; is a crucial motivator of millions of citizens around the world; and is an essential if non-governmental way of helping to make society work. To lose that contribution would not just be a pity; it would be a huge backward step.

We shall be studying the outcomes of the conference with the keenest interest. We hope that the discussions over the next two days will produce ideas which we can explore and take forward - perhaps in partnership with some of you here today. We are especially interested to consider how the messages from this conference can best be conveyed to grassroots communities.

I want to set this conference in a broader context. Round the world today there is a new and urgent impetus being given to promulgating the true voices of Islam.

This is especially the case in the field of education. When I visited Indonesia last year, a Muslim majority country of over 200 million, I saw at first hand the way in which religious schools there are reforming to equip their students not just with a sound religious education, but also with training to boost their employment prospects. This work challenges the myth that religious schools need only focus on orthodox religious education.

The Pakistani Government too has undertaken an ambitious and difficult programme of madrassa reform, encouraging schools to register and develop a common syllabus and basic

standards.

In Singapore, new more interactive teaching methods have been introduced by the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, moving away from teaching by rote to teaching which is specific to age group, more relevant to the wider context in which students live and more lively.

Many in our Muslim communities in the UK are encouraging reform and change in our madrassas here.

The Bradford Council of Mosques has agreed to incorporate citizenship education in the curriculum for their madrassas, an important initiative, which we hope will be adopted right across the country. And it is right to encourage links between schools in the state sector and institutions that provide religious education, given the hugely important role these institutions play in so many children's education and well-being.

But the role of education goes much wider than simply religious education. At the recent Middle East World Economic Forum, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, announced the creation of a groundbreaking \$10 billion foundation to promote education in Arab countries.

The foundation will focus on human development, supporting and empowering young minds and focusing on research, education and investment in the infrastructure of knowledge. It will provide scholarships for study at world-reputed institutions. In neighbouring Qatar, the Government has invited top international universities to develop an "Education City" with the aim of becoming the beacon of educational excellence in the Arab world.

Many of these initiatives are designed to tap into the ages-old tradition of Islam where - in line with the Koran - knowledge is revered and Muslims urged to pursue it.

Then there are the many signs of political reform in the Muslim world, and the encouragement of women's rights. Suffrage has been awarded to women in Kuwait and women stood for the first time in Bahrain's elections last year.

In Morocco, fifty women have been appointed as state preachers for the first time. They will be able to give basic religious instruction in Mosques and support in prisons, schools and hospitals.

As highlighted by Emine Bozkurt's work, the position of

women has improved in Turkey over recent years, with, in particular, a strong emphasis on education for girls.

In Afghanistan, the Afghan Women's Hour is a programme that would have been inconceivable not long ago. It offers girls, their mothers and their grandmothers a place to speak and to listen to one another. The full gamut of issues has been aired: standing for Parliament, learning to read, starting a business, the prevention of maternal mortality.

In Jordan, last month, a conference took place, with the assistance of Queen Rania, to build and empower Muslim female leadership across the Middle East.

There is also a clear move across the world to assert strongly the moderate and true authority of Islam.

In Jordan, in 2004, under the leadership of HM King Abdullah, a statement, the Amman Message was released seeking to declare what Islam is and what it is not, and how it should be manifested.

I was deeply impressed when, the next year, the King convened 200 leading scholars from no less than 50 countries, who unanimously - unanimously - issued a Declaration on 3 basic issues: the validity of different Islamic schools of thought and theology; the forbidding of declarations of apostasy between Muslims; and criteria for the issuing of fatwas - religious edicts - to pre-empt the spawning of illegitimate versions.

This was a clear message that Islam is not a monolithic faith, but one made up of a rich pattern of diversity, albeit all flowing from the same fount. This rich diversity needs to be more clearly appreciated and to inform our public debates more fully.

Also in 2005, the summit meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference issued a declaration and a 10-year action plan. The summit reaffirmed Islam as a religion of moderation and modernity. It rejected bigotry and extremism. It supported work to establish the values of Islam as those of understanding, tolerance, dialogue and multilateralism. It adopted the principles of the Amman Message - as indeed did other gatherings of scholars around the world.

And in 2006 the Topkapi declaration emphasised that Muslims have long played a distinguished part in European history and encouraged them to continue doing so. It stressed the opportunities for Muslims to flourish as full citizens the pluralistic societies which increasingly

characterise every country in this continent, especially since the fall of Communism.

I draw four lessons from these and other similar examples.

Firstly, that the role of theology and philosophy is vital to Islam, indeed as it is to any religion, in helping its adherents to engage with the modern world whilst drawing on its core principles.

Secondly, Muslims overwhelmingly want to play a full part in the complex and diverse societies in which they find themselves - both contributing and shaping those societies. Most seek to play a part as loyal citizens of their countries and as loyal Muslims. This is of course contrary to the often crude portrayals in the media or by those who deal only in stereotypes and seek to whip up Islamophobic sentiment.

Thirdly, others in societies in which Muslims are co-citizens must also evolve and adapt in how they respond to the changing nature of their societies. This is a two way street. Each must learn from the other, about the other.

And fourthly, and as a natural consequence of my first three points, the great religions of the world must continue the dialogue between them, and help interfaith work to grow. Greater mutual understanding should be the aim of all of us. And a closer working together to tackle the needs of our shared world - needs which are often pressing and cry out for action.

We publish today the Siddiqui Report on the UK and what more we need to do to encourage the right intellectual and academic debate on these issues here in Britain.

We intend to follow-up on many of Dr Siddiqui's recommendations and will be providing significant funding to deliver on this commitment.

None of this, incidentally, is designed to screen out a healthy rigorous debate about the controversies of foreign policy.

Many Christians disagreed with the decisions I took over Afghanistan or Iraq. Leave aside for a moment whether they were the right or wrong decisions. What is damaging is if they are seen in the context of religious decisions.

The religious faith of either country was as irrelevant to the decision as was the fact that the Kosovo Albanians we rescued were Muslims, suffering under a Serbian dictatorship, whose religion happened to be Christian

Orthodox; or in helping the people of Sierra Leone, 70 per cent of whom are Muslim.

This point is crucial at a number of different levels. The problem between faiths and communities, as too often in life and in politics, is not where there is disagreement about decisions; but where there is misunderstanding about motives. In turn, this is often derived from a misunderstanding of a deeper sort: a basic ignorance about the other's faith. I was asked the other day by a young person if it was true Muslims wanted to kill all Christians.

"No", I said. "And did you know that Muslims revere Jesus as a Prophet?" The youngster was astounded, barely able to believe there are significant passages in the Koran devoted to Jesus, and to Mary. I recommend the book "The Muslim Jesus" to anyone interested in this aspect.

But the point is this: one part of such a Conference is to explain Islam to the world: its common roots with Judaism and Christianity, how it began, how it developed, how far removed it is, from the crude and warped distortion of the extremists. Where there is ignorance, there is distrust, and sometimes hatred. Understanding is a great healer.

So this Conference is not about Government lecturing the Muslim world, or our Muslim communities. It is rather an opportunity to listen; to hear Islam's true voice; to welcome and appreciate them; and in doing so, to join up with all those who believe in a world where religious faith is respected because faiths respect each other as well as those of no faith; and are prepared in holding to their own truth, not to disrespect the truth clear to others. I wish you well in your deliberations. ”