

**British,
Muslims,
Citizens**

Introspection and Renewal

**By
Muhammad Abdul Bari**

British, Muslims, Citizens

Muslims in Britain have experienced considerable changes in all walks of life over the last few decades. From a small beginning in post-War Britain the Muslim community has evolved to be a diverse section of the British population. With significantly higher proportion of youth within the community it is faced with tremendous challenges and opportunities, as is the case with any group of people settling in a new land.

For British Muslims, never before has there been a more urgent need for fresh ideas and new thinking on how they interact with each other, with fellow citizens and with the wider world. It is time the British Muslim community took a reality check of how it is doing in creating a universal, progressive and inclusive vision of Islam; a vision that will motivate and empower them to excel in the common good of all by remaining true to the deeper message of Islam.

About the Author

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Preface

The main purpose of this monograph is to generate discussion and debate within the British Muslim community. It aims to focus attention on long-term strategic issues, while not ignoring the immediate and medium term concerns. The long-term strategy includes issues surrounding faith, faith-community empowerment and wider engagement with other Britons. My long experience of grass-root youth and community outreach work, in the East End of London since the 1980's and later across Britain due to my role in the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), has obliged me to address some of these issues and concerns. My four years as the head of MCB, a voluntary post, were demanding but rewarding and I have learnt a lot from this experience.

Whilst it is possible to point towards many trigger points for the current challenges faced by British Muslims – the Rushdie Affair, UK policies towards Bosnia and the first Gulf War, etc – in its present form it has been significantly shaped by the responses to the Northern cities disturbances in the Summer of 2001, worsened by the catastrophic events of 9/11 and then exacerbated still further by the 7/7 London bombings. But, however mired we may become in these times of difficulties, it is clear that we require a comprehensive framework for self-analysis and moving forward. Our challenges may even become more acute before they get any better.

I hope this monograph will act as a catalyst for some clear thinking within our communities across the nation. We need to keep Britain's pluralism alive, better understand the needs of people and community organisations and respond to those who see in Islam a political threat and stigmatise Muslims as the 'Other'.

I am grateful to a number of friends and colleagues for their valuable comments. May Allah shower His blessings on them.

1. Introduction

At a time when Muslims had been making steady progress on many fronts in their better participation in Britain's socio-economic and political life, the northern cities disturbances and atrocities of 9/11 in 2001 created an enormous debate surrounding the evolving Muslim community. This debate was often one sided, with powerful right wing media and politicians setting the agenda of a discourse lacking balance and objectivity. Some, overly zealous, tried to prove that Islam is not compatible with Western values and sought to put the religion itself in the dock. Others tried to generalise the extremism and criminality of a few Muslims and sought to blame the whole community of complicity. This attempt to racialise or 'Islamise' crime not only gave succour to racist and fascist groups, such as the British National Party (BNP) and later the English Defence League (EDL), but is sadly now influencing mainstream politics itself.

The EDL has been highly active in recent years and has organised many demonstrations in front of mosques across the country from the summer of 2009. The EDL started with a small group of football hooligans, but has since become far more sophisticated in its anti-Muslim hate-mongering. Most British people, however, still see them as racist bigots and fascists, and so they are changing their tactics and seeking to recruit Muslim-haters from other communities to prove that they are not racists.

Muslim leaders and organisations have been asking for stern action against these Muslim hate mongers. But so far there has only been a lacklustre response from the political class on this, preferring instead, on occasions, to even pander to it. An exception are the forthright remarks by Britain's most senior politician, Sayeeda Warsi, who in a speech delivered at Leicester University on 20th January 2011 provoked discomfort and drew huge criticism¹ from the right wing media and politicians.

Unfortunately, whether advertently or inadvertently, the seed of suspicion about Muslim communities is being sowed in the wider public, and this has the potential for dire consequences in the future if not addressed properly and nipped in the bud now. The political steps taken in some European countries – such as the banning of the veil in France and Belgium (where only a tiny minority of women wear this) and the banning of minarets in Switzerland – are adding further burden on our politics here. However, we must make sure this issue of anti-Muslim bigotry and Islamophobia is seen in context and through the prism of European history. It must not be overblown out of proportion.

Due to a global economic crisis our country has also been undergoing an economic slowdown and as a result the government has tightened the belt on public spending. Concerns around losing jobs have seriously hit the public sectors which employ many people from the minority

¹ Baroness Warsi claimed that Islamophobia had “now crossed the threshold of middle-class respectability”. She also warned that the tendency to divide Muslims between "moderates" and "extremists" can fuel misunderstanding and intolerance.

<http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/224424/Tory-unease-as-Sayeeda-Warsi-hits-at-spread-of-Islamophobia>
<http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/peteroborne/100072900/hatred-of-muslims-is-one-of-the-last-bastions-of-british-bigotry/>
<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/mehdi-hasan/2011/01/muslim-bigotry-warsi-british>

communities. Some sections within the Muslim community, for example, the Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and now Somalis - who are already at the sharp end of poverty and inequality in British society,² are going to be affected even more. Competition for jobs and resources in these difficult economic times also negatively impact on relations between different communities.

As British Muslims originate from the four corners of the world, they are also affected by what happens in their countries of origin. Muslims of South Asia and the Middle East are affected by conflicts in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine. Similarly, Somali people are affected by what happens back in Somalia. The UK government's foreign policy in recent times has become the focal point of Muslim resentment and frustration. The effect of these international issues on our life in Britain cannot simply be brushed aside, no matter how much the right wing media try to portray this as the Muslim community's 'victim mentality'.

The overall picture in our community is very mixed. On the one hand, many in the Muslim communities are socio-economically disadvantaged by practical reasons to do with their rural backgrounds in their countries of origin, whilst some Muslims, particularly from among the youth, feel disillusioned and excluded from the rest of society due to the additional burden of continuous media and political scrutiny. But, on the other hand, it is also a fact that Muslims are significantly over-represented in some areas of life, for example, in the health and medical profession. The progress in other sectors, e.g., in business and charities, is also encouraging. Whatever the reasons, the reality of educational under-achievement, social deprivation and disproportionate numbers of prisoners in British jails are undermining the community and its confidence from within. These issues need to be tackled head on.

It is also a reality that there is a fringe element of extremists within the Muslim community who thrive on intolerance and vie for media coverage, and by doing so, they undermine and endanger the whole community. We should all try harder to find the root causes of this scourge of extremism and seek to address them effectively; extremism is against the spirit of Islam – a religion of the middle way.

The Muslim community has an obligation to come forward and become stakeholders in the political, economic and social life of Britain and to join hands with others in society to create and sustain social justice and harmony. They can only do this if they are able to build their internal capacity and by unlocking the potentials of their youth. They need to appreciate that they can only be equal partners with others if their socio-economic conditions are improved and they are seen as serious contributors to Britain's overall prosperity. They need to speed up their journey of educational, social and economic endeavour and fully participate in positive social interaction and engagement to create a better Britain. There is an urgent need

² A number of surveys carried out by prominent bodies, governmental and non-governmental, give similar stories. The most authoritative research was carried out in 1997 by the Policy Studies Institute and was published as *Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage*. It found that Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities, mostly Muslims, were at the bottom of the pile in socio-economic indicators. The Office for National Statistics analysed the 2001 Census data and found an alarming picture about certain communities. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) published an invaluable report, *Poverty, Exclusion and British people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi Origin* in 2006 that has similarly shown how, once again, the Bangladeshi and Pakistani communities are doing very badly. Things have not improved significantly in the last few years. Rather in the current economic crisis these two communities and Somali community are known to be suffering more.

for a genuine soul-searching exercise in the British Muslim community, a robust introspection, to perform better in all walks of life.

A brief detour of the past and recent experiences will refresh our memory on the emergence of our diverse community. This is relevant to chart our future in this interesting and challenging time.

2. The emergence of a diverse community

The Muslim presence in Britain is not new; the links with Britain are historical.³ King Offa of Mercia (died 796), a powerful Anglo-Saxon King, had coins minted with the inscription of the *kalimah* (the Muslim declaration of faith) in Arabic, indicating diplomatic and commercial ties with Muslims in France, Spain and North Africa. The mercantile and commercial links between Britain and the Muslim world stretch back a very long time.

The Universities of Oxford and Cambridge established Chairs of Arabic in the 1630s, and scholars in Britain relied heavily on translations from the Arabic in the fields of mathematics, astronomy and medicine throughout the medieval period and the Renaissance. A rendering of the Qur'an in English was produced by Alexander Ross in 1649, and this edition had two imprints, attesting to its wide circulation. By the 19th century many Muslim seamen had settled in most of the ports of England, Wales and Scotland.

Organised Muslim activities in London owe much to the Indian Muslim Justice Syed Ameer Ali, who came to live in England after his retirement in 1904. He was the first Muslim Privy Councillor, and along with other prominent Muslim and non-Muslim personalities of the day, established the London Mosque Fund in 1910 that later became the East London Mosque. The former Indian Civil Servant, barrister and Qur'anic scholar, Abdullah Yusuf Ali (died 1953) also settled in London in 1914, and the pair became effective advocates of British Muslim concerns at home and abroad.⁴

However, a significant Muslim presence is comparatively recent, with its roots in immigration particularly from South Asia after the Second World War when Britain needed people from Commonwealth countries for its post-war reconstruction. According to Census 2001 there were approximately 1.6m Muslims in the UK; but the number has significantly increased in the last decade. In the beginning, it was simply about a matter of survival of the new communities in the new environment and helping one another with their basic social, religious and cultural needs, e.g., prayer places, *halal* food, etc. However, as the communities were growing through further migration, new births and receiving converts, their demands for socio-economic needs also grew. The Muslim communities started establishing their own businesses, schools, charities, purpose-built mosques and community centres. The overwhelming majority of Muslims in Britain started to happily integrate into wider society through positive contributions to the economy, politics and culture – whilst still keeping to the basic principles of their faith.

Under the effect of globalisation, probably for the first time in many centuries, ultra-conservative to extreme liberal and practising to non-practising Muslims of various ethnic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds were living side by side in British towns and cities. Their

³ Islam in Britain 1558-1685, N. Matar, Cambridge University Press, 1998

⁴ Searching for Solace, M.A.Sherif, IBT, 1994.

ethnicity and faith often, however, get confused. They are of different sects, theological and political trends, lifestyle and fashion. To some Muslims coming from mono-ethnic or mono-religious backgrounds this diversity is amazing. In terms of all socio-economic factors and in their hopes, concerns and aspirations the Muslim community has never been monolithic and as such it has rightly been termed as a 'community of communities'. Most Muslims live in a number of inner city conurbation across Britain and symbolises the diversity of the Muslim *ummah* in terms of language, culture, ethnicity and religious and social trends. Overall, the progress of the community in Britain, in both socio-economic and political terms over the decades, has been encouraging.

However, this relatively peaceful journey was met by a terrible shock on 7 July 2005 when four young men, British and Muslim, blew themselves up and created carnage in London. The announcement in Singapore on 6th July 2005 that London was to host the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic games had created immense euphoria across the country and pride in Britain as a diverse society. That joy and pride was shattered the following day when London faced a catastrophe by the suicide bombings on its streets. This proved to be a key milestone that has affected Muslims in Britain and across Europe ever since. It inaugurated a new relationship between Muslim citizens and the people around them. Any discussion on British Muslims since then is influenced by those events.

Overnight, the Muslim community seemed to be placed in the dock. On the one hand, over-zealous sections of the media were only interested in sensationalism, while on the other, Government gradually sidelined mainstream Muslim bodies in favour of compliant voices. For many Muslims, clichés that are usually the preserve of fringe commentators began seeping into the mainstream discourse. The Blair government introduced a number of policies *vis a vis* Muslims that conflated security with community cohesion, which had lasting negative impacts on community harmony.

By August 2005 *The Observer* and a BBC Panorama programme accused the MCB, the largest and most representative Muslim body, of being nothing short of extremist; while prior to the bombings the Muslim community was often praised for its adherence to family values, hard work and enterprise. Britain's largest Muslim community complex, the London Muslim Centre (LMC) in East London, was subjected to unfounded accusations of receiving tainted funding and for sympathising with extremists. The reality is that the LMC itself is continuously attacked, and has been for many years, by fringe groups within the Muslim community such as Al-Muhajiroun and its incarnations, for its moderation. The development of the LMC was only possible because of the unprecedented financial support from the local communities and not because of financing from any dubious external sources.

As if taking aim at British Muslim institutions was not enough, we now face renewed and re-invigorated demands to reform our faith and our Scripture, the Qur'an. There are now increasingly loud, but ill informed calls for an Islamic 'reformation' and a demand on us to re-interpret our Holy Book according to the preferences of those who have little historical and theological knowledge of Islam. This is probably due to the misunderstanding that Muslims are obsessed with their past and cannot accommodate change. In fact, the opposite is true. Renewal or *tajdeed* (continually contextualising religious teachings to contemporary needs) is an obligation on the Muslim *ummah*. The process has been on-going since the dawn of Islam and many great scholars have made enormous contributions on this front. Few Muslims, however, feel comfortable using the word 'reformation' with regards to Islamic renewal

because of the historical connotations the European 'Reformation' presents.⁵ The discussion on contextualising the Text in contemporary contexts is very much alive among Muslims, particularly in the West.

The Danish Cartoon saga was one of the episodes leading to discussions about the place of Muslims in Europe. The decision to publish detestable cartoons caricaturing Islam's beloved Prophet (peace be upon him) in parts of Europe, despite calls for restraint by many people, fell on deaf ears and led to unprecedented protests. In February 2006 a handful of young men in London held up some highly offensive placards, but the police decided not to arrest them at that time. Sections of the media chose to focus on these individuals rather than reports on the legitimate and peaceful protests of the majority of British Muslims across the country.

Crimes committed by some criminals, happening to be from the Muslim community or from a community comprising of mostly Muslims, easily get distorted and become racialised or Islamised by some cynical columnists in mainstream papers. This unabated negative portrayal has created an environment of distrust for Muslims in many people's minds. The online YouGov poll, published on 7 June 2010, found 58% of those questioned linked Islam with extremism.⁶ When a criminal gang of some Asian men of Pakistani origin were convicted in January 2011 for their nefarious crime of grooming young vulnerable girls for sex in Derby the news immediately invited appalling comments on the entire Pakistani (Muslim) community. Sadly, the former Home Secretary, Jack Straw, also joined the fray and made a blanket assertion regarding Pakistani men.⁷

In recent years the banning of the veil in France, which in reality is worn by only a very small proportion of Muslim women, and the banning of minarets in Switzerland have impacted on debates surrounding Muslims. Far right political groups are making electoral gains in some European countries. In response, the mainstream political parties appear to be taking stronger lines against Islam and Muslims in those countries. On the other side of the Atlantic, in the US, a row erupted in the summer of 2010 around plans for a Muslim community centre two blocks away from Ground Zero in New York that divided the country on its Muslim citizens. Adding to this fire, was the threat of the burning of the Qur'an by a pastor in Florida – which later actually took place. All these events demonstrate the limits of tolerance that Western societies are prepared to extend to their Muslim citizens - limits which in some cases are being carved specifically for Muslims.

Young Muslims are now probably the most talked about section of the population in the British media. Young people in any society need space to think and to situate their own identity with their own reference points, but due to continuous negative attention by the media the space is sadly very limited indeed for young British Muslims – and this is only adding to their problems.

⁵ "Allah will raise for this community at the end of every hundred years someone who will restore its religion for it." (*Reported by Abu Daud*)

"Religion is very easy and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way. So you should not be extremists, but try to be near to perfection and receive the good tidings that you will be rewarded." (*Reported by al-Bukhari*)

⁶ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10251827>

⁷ http://www.mcb.org.uk/media/presstext.php?ann_id=427

This may be considered as an excessive characterisation of our state of affairs, but it conveys the living experience for many in the British Muslim community. We are left with little room for balanced discussion and the atmosphere has generally become very hostile and Islamophobic⁸. The Coalition government's publication of its 'Prevent'⁹ strategy in June 2011 (part of its overall counter-terrorism strategy) will not help the situation. It is sadly based on the same discredited¹⁰ 'conveyor belt theory' as in previous strategies, which contends that individuals move from being disaffected and angry to becoming more religious and politicised, and then finally turn to fundamentalism and terrorism. As fingers are pointed towards the Muslim youth, many of them feel that they will never be accepted or treated equally as British citizens.

However, on the positive side, civil society on the whole, and even the Coalition Government from time to time tries to strike a balance. For example, on the veil issue, our Ministers disapproved of the French route. Senior religious leaders in Britain spoke against the threat of burning the Qur'an in the US.

In this state of affairs the questions that thus arise are:

- How, as a community, are Muslims performing socio-economically and politically in contemporary Britain's pluralist environment?
- What internal and external challenges are Muslims facing in their efforts towards a more positive social engagement with other Britons, and how are they coping?
- How can the Muslim community navigate through this challenging phase and come out stronger to become fuller participants of society without losing their basic Islamic principles?

As the dust of 7/7 is gradually settling, the Muslim community is now in a position to introspect and discuss these questions in a more mature and objective manner. We can also learn from the experiences of other faith and ethnic communities who - not long ago - had encountered similar challenges. The legal and cultural traditions of modern Britain are robust; this is certainly the case in comparison to the situation in continental Europe. Britain has, in recent decades, progressed to a nation of multiple but complementary identities. In addition to class or ethnicity-based demarcations, faith identity too has been accommodated. This was

⁸ Islamophobia refers to 'unfounded hostility towards Islam'. It also refers to the practical consequences of such hostility in unfair discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, and to the exclusion of Muslims from mainstream political and social affairs.' The Runnymede Trust, *Islamophobia: A Challenge for us all*, (London 1997), p4. Since 1997 the term has been frequently used by Muslims and others to describe anti-Muslim hate. Criticism of Islam and the Muslim community does not fall in this category. The phrase sometimes used by police is 'Islamophobic race hate crime'. In the aftermath of 7/7 in 2005 this hate crime peaked to 600%.

However, despite having been part of the social and political lexicon since 1997, an alliance of right wing columnists and think tanks are calling for the term Islamophobia to be replaced with phrases such as 'anti-Muslim prejudice', 'anti-Muslim bigotry' or 'anti-Muslim hatred'. They say that the term 'hands a propaganda coup to Islamists'. This is robustly contested by many like Dr Chris Allen of Birmingham University, the European Muslims Research Centre based in Exeter University, and more recently in 'Thinking through Islamophobia: Global Perceptions', co-edited by A. Vakil and S. Sayid.

⁹ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/counter-terrorism/prevent/prevent-strategy/>

¹⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/aug/20/uksecurity.terrorism1>

positively exemplified in the inclusion of a religion question in the 2001 Census.¹¹ It is crucial that Muslims see the current challenges in context, analyse them objectively and redouble efforts to turn these challenges into opportunities; not only for Muslims but for all in our society.

3. The state of the British Muslim community today

Muslims originate from many parts of the world making them probably the most diverse faith community in the country. The majority have connections with the Indian sub-continent – their presence is attributed to the historical legacy of the British Empire. The greater proportion of younger British Muslims is from Pakistan and Bangladesh. The nature of challenges faced by various Muslim communities has changed over the decades. But the fact that many people, particularly from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds, are at the bottom of many socio-economic indicators, be that education, employment, housing or health, is a matter of concern to all. Unfortunately, there is a higher level of unemployment even amongst the new generation of Muslim youth with graduate degrees. The social inequalities, general lack of effective internal leadership at various levels and sectors of the community, under-utilisation of mosque facilities and a lack of co-ordinated strategy to move ahead are the major issues that inhibit Muslim progress and undermine their full social engagement.

There are variations in terms of religious practices, experience and commitment to Islam. A young Muslim's empathy with the faith and other fellow Muslims is not simply affected by the religious text, but also by his or her relationship with the older generation, peer group, educational and family upbringing, affiliation to Muslim groups and experience with the wider world. Impressionable Muslim youth, like their counterparts in other communities, have their own hopes, aspirations and concerns. For many, the present domestic and world situation has contributed to frustrations and disappointments. There seems to be some despondency in various sections of the community with little light being seen at the end of the tunnel.

a) Family, parenting and the generation gap

A community starts with individuals within families. The nascent Muslim community here has emerged in a pluralist British society that has itself experienced major changes in social attitudes¹². Increasing family dysfunction, under the pressure of the commercialisation of all aspects of life, is not necessarily the preserve of 'Western societies'. The pressures of modern life are taking their toll on Muslim families as well. Domestic violence, family separation and other social challenges within the Muslim community are on the rise.

From my own practical experience within Muslim communities, I see the problems within families and between generations stemming from a general lack of effective parenting relevant to the needs and emotional demands of children growing up in the complexity of a

¹¹ For an account of community involvement see 'A Census chronicle - reflections on the campaign for a religion question in the 2001 Census for England and Wales', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, Volume 32, Number 1, April 2011, pp. 1-18(18)

¹² Modern Britain presents multi-dimensional challenges to the traditional and religious values not only of Muslims and many other conservative people from other religious backgrounds today. Mainstream British society speaks of cohabitation, same-sex civil partnerships, one-parent families and the dilution of family values. For a further exposition on the subject, see the author's books, *Marriage and Family Building in Islam* and *The Greatest Gift: A Guide to Parenting from an Islamic Perspectives*, (London: Ta-Ha Publishers).

modern pluralist society. Children are generally well-loved when they are young and few difficulties arise before they are about ten years of age. But the same children naturally change during their adolescence, normally when they start going to secondary schools, where demands and temptations of our consumerist and permissive society tend to influence young minds severely. The inter-generational gap is a major issue for all people in all societies in every age, but for Muslims this has an additional dimension and worries. A massive cultural gap develops between them and their children in this phase of their children's lives, especially for those who are recent arrivals or who have just started settling into a society so different from their original homelands. The educational background of parents and the socio-economic difficulties they face also seem to be major reasons behind ineffective parenting. Social issues, such as deprivation and alienation, also contribute towards this poor parenting.

Parents arriving from rural and varying cultural backgrounds in developing countries often find it difficult to relate to their own children who grow up with the complexities of modern city life. Many parents become emotionally and intellectually detached from their children and lose confidence in engaging with them, let alone guiding them to lead a balanced life of being a Muslim and responsible British citizen.

For many reasons young Muslims are still lagging behind other groups in education, though this is improving of late. Sadly, basic Islamic teachings and an awareness of a balanced Muslim culture are also largely absent from many homes. What children most often see is the cultural baggage their first generation elders have carried with them to Britain. Due to the lack of solid knowledge on Islam some young Muslims fail to differentiate between the universal message of their religion and the cultural practices of their parents' countries of origin. It is still not an easy situation for some.

The dominant liberal, materialistic and consumer culture in Western societies places a lot of pressure on young people. Like young people in other minority communities, many Muslim youth are torn between two apparently contradictory cultures, one at home and the other in wider society. This creates a lack or crisis of confidence in some. The lack of self-esteem gives rise to confusion in their identity, sometimes leading to either retreat within themselves or to delinquent behaviour outside. There are of course exceptions, but on the whole the Muslim community lacks the institutional infra-structure and parental awareness needed to overcome these challenges.

b) Our mosques¹³ and Islamic centres

In Muslim history, community institutions, Imams and local leaders have always stepped in and helped individuals and families in their locality in raising their children imbued with Islamic values. This is all the more relevant in today's inner cities in many western countries where Muslims have a significant presence. But this is missing for many.

In spite of many shortcomings, the efforts of first generation Muslims in helping one another in the locality are praiseworthy and should not go unnoticed. Mosques, Islamic centres and Muslim schools have grown over the decades throughout the British Isles. In many cases these were done in the face of financial constraints and other adversities; immigrants arrived in Britain and, notwithstanding meagre incomes, many of them sought to build their community infrastructures – particularly public prayer places and community centres.

¹³ <http://www.the-platform.org.uk/2011/05/15/our-mosques-our-hope/>

The existence of hundreds of mosques and Islamic centres has given rise to many evening or weekend schools across the country. It is true that most of them suffer from a lack of resources and the absence of professionalism in many cases falls short of harnessing the energy and creativity of our children who attend them. Due to language and cultural barriers in some places, young learners do not feel motivated and mosques are losing their attraction. In this situation, young Muslims are tempted to follow high profile celebrities, often negative role models promoted in the media.

In a large number of cases however, the issue of opening up access to women and young persons, of accountability in terms of governance processes, of reaching out beyond one particular national grouping or school of thought, remain. Rather than being an invaluable source of strength and unity, some mosque management committees themselves are sources of community tension and disharmony. Many mosque committees do not have transparent processes to hold them answerable and accountable, particularly where the institution is not a registered charity. Mosques are public places and should exemplify inclusiveness, but some are still failing to accommodate people from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. We pride ourselves of our diversity, but this is not reflected in many of our mosques and centres. In short, many mosques are falling short of following the model practised by the Prophet (peace be upon him) and his companions. The Prophet's mosque was, in addition to being a religious and spiritual centre, a social and community hub.

There is also criticism from some quarters on important issues such as child protection¹⁴ in some mosques and the level of toleration of extremism in some Muslim schools and *madrasahs*¹⁵. While criticism of this nature has to be balanced, any allegation of this nature is a cause for concern and should be taken seriously by the Muslim community. In response to the latest allegations by Channel 4 Dispatches programme the MCB stated that it does not believe that 'the abuse of children in *madrasah* and mosque-based education is a widespread phenomenon in Britain and we believe that the vast majority of British mosques hold the health and safety of children to be of utmost importance, following true Islamic teaching and British law'. However, it also reiterated that 'one incident of child-abuse is one incident too many. Our community must work together to root out any such behaviour in our precious institutions'.

There are, of course, a good number of mosques that have become beacons of success. After the publication of a MCB research paper, 'Voices from the Minarets', it initiated a 'Mosque Capacity Building' project to increase the capacity and professionalism of our mosques across

¹⁴ The issue was first brought out in public rather sensationally in a report after 7/7 (22nd March 2006) by the 'Muslim Parliament' which alleged that 'the Muslim community is in a state of denial' when it comes to 'child abuse in mosques, *madrasah* (mosque schools) and families'. The reality is, in spite of very limited resources, mosques are trying to provide good education to their young children and many mosques, realising that they need to improve their professionalism, are working with their local Councils on child protection and other issues. There may be isolated cases of child abuse, but to portray this as 'child sex-abuse scandals as has happened with the Roman Catholic Church in the 1990s' is unfair. The Quilliam Foundation later carried out another research in similar line.

¹⁵ Recently, on 14 February 2011, Channel 4 Dispatches aired a programme, '*Lessons in Hate and Violence*' which accused Islamic schools and *madrasah* of allegedly tolerating child abuse and extremism in their institutions. The Association of Muslim Schools, the umbrella organisation of Independent Muslim schools in the country, and the Muslim Council of Britain responded to these allegations as follows: <http://www.ams-uk.org/home/press-release/223-press-release-ams-uk-response-to-dispatches-lessons-in-hate-and-violence>; http://www.mcb.org.uk/media/presstext.php?ann_id=434

the country. Subsequently, the Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board (MINAB) was established in 2009 with a view to advising British mosques on how best they can serve the community. The community now needs speedy positive changes in mosques across the country by involving our *ulamah*, youth and women so that mosques can play their genuinely deserved roles in serving the community and the nation with full confidence and pride.

c) The untapped talents of our young people and women

The Muslim community is blessed with a higher proportion of young people in its midst and they are genuinely assets for the nation. Young people are the most energetic and creative section of any society.

Being largely unable to properly engage with our youth and women, and often criticising them for their relative lack of cultural sensitivity, we seem unable to grasp the opportunity and harness their potential. We tend to forget the historical fact that almost all the companions of our beloved Prophet (peace be upon him) were young, from the age of 9 to 37, when he started his Prophetic mission. He loved them, guided them, trusted them and listened to them. He tolerated their youthful impulsiveness and mistakes. In contrast, some among us often inadvertently join the chorus of the far right media and criticise our own young people for their youthful energy and occasional misdemeanour. Young people need to be guided, of course, from overstepping the mark. However, the 7/7 atrocities has already placed burdens on them not experienced before and because of the unremitting criticism they face, many Muslim youth have felt further alienated from our mosques and communities. Sadly, young Muslim men are by far the most stigmatised section of our society. They are under enormous pressure from many different directions.

Young people, boys and girls, are impressionable and often vulnerable to the allurement around them. With the adult society being unable to provide moral leadership on many fronts, the moral bankruptcy of our political class as illustrated by the recent MPs' expenses scandal to name just one example, young people feel disillusioned with and disconnected from the adult world around them and some take a rejectionist attitude. In the case of young Muslims, anti-Muslim rhetoric from the media and political class make things worse for them, as they are the ones who face the brunt of it, in the educational campuses and in wider society. The traditional over-protective nature of the Muslim community and the general lack of effective support from parents, community and mosques contribute to their disillusionment. They are often inhibited from taking up community responsibilities and do not feel a sense of ownership in community projects and initiatives. Their talents are not sufficiently recognised in their own communities, and thus, some waste their energy in the superficial pursuit of alternate realities whilst a small but significant proportion of others sadly become engaged in anti-social behaviour or criminality.

Although there are good exceptions, Muslim women, including young girls, are also generally under-utilised in community building. As in wider society, Muslim girls are also doing far better than boys in education, but their potentials still need to be harnessed. Women are normally the anchor of any society and Muslim women represent an enviable past in creating and preserving lasting Islamic civilisations. Their positive and creative roles in all fields of knowledge and all walks of life are recorded in history. But often due to the influence of other cultures, their role has diminished in recent centuries.

The facilities for women in many British mosques are less than satisfactory. Although offering congregational prayers in the mosque is not compulsory for women, the practice for them to pray in the mosque was established by the Prophet (peace be upon him) himself. Unless there is a genuine space problem in accommodating women in mosques, there is no justification to keep them away from the houses of Allah. It is not infrequent to hear ladies complaining of the unwelcoming environment in mosques; albeit for cultural reasons.

The contribution and sacrifices of our young men and women are of immense importance in the evolving phase of our communities. The sooner the Muslim community realises that denying the talents of young Muslim women and men run contrary to the teachings of Islam and the practice of early Muslims, the better. In the midst of the current wave of the negative portrayal of Islam as a misogynist religion, Muslim women are now needed more than ever before to defend Islam socially and intellectually.

d) Between rigidity and laxity in our religion¹⁶

Islam dictates that in our submission to Allah we must be balanced, judicious and compassionate to our surroundings. Mainstream Muslim opinion has made it absolutely clear that Islam is a religion of the 'middle-path'¹⁷ and there is no justification for advocating extremism, let alone being involved in violent or criminal actions. Sadly, a tiny proportion in our communities today is susceptible to extremist attitudes, in both belief and action. This is due to either ignorance or a narrow understanding of the religion. In discussing this we also refer to those who go to extraordinary lengths to abandon Islamic principles and succumb to catch slogans in vogue.

Some dogmatic scholars, albeit small in number, advocate that the community should maintain its 'purity' by isolating itself from modern society which is full of permissive values and social ills. Some of them are resistant to Muslims participating in wider society, as they think this will dilute their religiosity. Young people are thus, according to them, supposed to bury their head in the sand like ostriches and retain their 'purity'. They do not have the foresight to recognise the fact that their approach is a recipe for disaster in the years to come. They forget that Muslims in the past were the agents of change, and that this was only possible because they always tried to be ahead of the curve. Resistance to change and fear of the new are embedded in human nature. This is how stagnation in the once creative Muslim *ummah* crept in and paved the way for intellectual and political disaster in the last few hundred years. Colonialism was an inevitable outcome of that stagnation.

Unable to negotiate with the changing world through knowledge and courageous actions these Muslims adopt simplistic explanations for the complexities of life and society and fail to engage with people outside their own small world. But some of them do not shy away from making news through their extremist behaviour. This is what we see in the fringe elements of our community who are busy making media headlines with their detestable public expression

¹⁶ Rigidity and laxity have become diseases among some in the Muslim *ummah*, especially to some young Muslims. Rudimentary and fragmentary knowledge of Islam on the one hand and anger and feelings of impotence with regards to the terrible injustices in the world on the other are probably the two main sources of extremism among some Muslims. Extremism goes against the very tenet of Islam. The Qur'an and the Sunnah categorically reject extremism in belief and action. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) warned Muslims of this deviation. Yusuf al-Qaradawi has discussed this in his *Islamic Awakening Between Rejection and Extremism* (1991) jointly published by the American Trust Publication and the IIIT in the US.

¹⁷ Al-Qur'an 2:143

of faith and unbecoming action. Some in our community call them 'useful idiots'. Islamophobic sections of the media tend to love them – and conveniently generalise their behaviour to create disdain about the whole Muslim community.

In contrast, some in the Muslim community have chosen to maintain a very casual approach towards religion. Often in the absence of basic knowledge and understanding of Islam on the one hand and the complexity of a developed pluralist society on the other, they bend on making compromises even on the most basic tenets of Islam. Islam seems to be too difficult for them, especially in modern times. They make compromises easily on religious principles when faced with the most simple of challenges.

Islam is a religion of moderation, a faith of the middle-path, and conscientious Muslims do not find it too hard in navigating through the realities and complexities of life within the boundary of their religion. They do not compromise with the basic tenets of Islam. In societies based on the rule of law and precedence, like ours in Britain where freedom of religion has been a constitutional cornerstone for centuries, it is probably easier to live as a good practising Muslim than in many Muslim countries under despotic rule. With increasing commitments to Islam-inspired social activism from many in the new generations of Muslims we hope things will get better.

e) The issue of our internal unity

With huge geographical, ethnic, sectarian and cultural variations there are still many teething problems within the Muslim community. The issue of internal unity is one that is often discussed with passion. The annual controversy on the community's inability to celebrate *Eid* festivals on the same day is a glaring example of the difficulties. This inability to unite on important religious festivals makes many Muslims impatient and critical of the Muslim leadership. But the issue is not so simple and Muslims should stop having ill feelings about each other because of this. This lack of internal unity is not, however, uncommon in many faith communities. It is hoped that with new generations of Muslim scholars this will gradually subside.

One can understand the difficulties in uniting disparate Muslim communities coming from the four corners of the world. It is also natural that Islamic groups will bring with them the theological, political and cultural baggage and trends of their countries of origin. The origins of the emergence of the Sunni and Shii Muslims with their different sects, schools of thought and denominational groups are a matter of distant Islamic history. But the groupings that are very much alive in Britain today are from trends within the Muslim world that have continued to divide Muslim communities in the West, e.g., Salafism, Sufism, Barelwism, Deobandism and Revivalism (internally known as 'the Islamic Movement'). While this is the reality of modern day Muslims, in recent years some right wing think tanks on both sides of the Atlantic have tried to divide Muslims in their own ideological way; into Liberals, Secularists, Moderates, Sufis, Traditionalists, and Islamists - with a view to advising Western governments on who they should work with and to what extent. This divisive agenda has proved counter-productive and detrimental to our community and national unity.

The community still has a long way to go on this. Some initiatives to limit internal differences within the communities are in progress. However, there are still challenges in this endeavour and the community has to overcome many internal disputes and continuous external

demands. The positive sign is that many in the younger generation are not so strongly bound to the first generation in this divisiveness and are trying to create a unique niche of their own. The post-7/7 media scrutiny may be indirectly helping Muslims to overcome some of their internal weaknesses, such as disunity. Although not perfect, the formation of the MCB with Muslims of diverse Sunni and Shii traditions, through a bottom up approach, has been seen as a positive move in the community. It was a unique experience anywhere in the West.

f) Our organisations and institutions

The first generation of Muslims should be given due credit for their pioneering role in not only building local Muslim institutions such as mosques and community centres, but also in forming some national organisations and initiatives to articulate issues that are important for their communities. Muslim organisations are religious, social and political in nature and share many trends that exist in the Muslim world. There are anxieties, tensions and apprehensions; they are, in some respects, the animating force in the British Muslim community.

Many of these organisations are, however, a product of their times. They were set up in an environment where some were probably enveloped in their time-bound ethnic or sectarian comfort zones. A few are still being run by the original leadership (in some cases, for decades), some are struggling to come out of the rhetoric and discourse of the 1970's and 1980's, while many others are seriously striving to adjust to the complex realities of 21st century modern pluralist Britain. There is a gradual realisation of bringing younger generation of leaders into their folds. There has also been some progress in areas where the second and third generation youth have been boldly asserting themselves in community and national politics. In Tower Hamlets, for example, young people made good progress in taking a political lead in the Borough in the early to mid-eighties after the Brick Lane battles with the National Front. Some mosques have also emerged in various parts of the country that are trying to model the Prophet's (peace be upon him) mosque in Madinah with a positive vision of engaging all sections of the community, including the youth and women.

To many, the pace of change is very slow indeed. They still see an absence of innovative ideas and fresh blood in Muslim organisations and institutions. Some complain that Muslim groups are just passing time; they do not see enough meaningful progress. Questions are continuously being raised as to organisational effectiveness and the quality of leadership. Instead of offering broader appeal and clear direction relevant to our time, in many cases the leadership seems to be stuck in employing the rhetoric and language of the past. Are they speaking to themselves and converting the converts? Is the literature used, talks delivered and events organised meeting the needs of the emerging community with the youth at its centre? The situation is mixed, but it will not be unfair to say that the young people are hardly inspired and motivated by many established Muslim groups and institutions. We are, in many places, losing a generational opportunity.

Some of the groups have indeed an active following, but they need to re-energise them with a vision for a change and passion for positive action to build their community as well as the nation. Unless our young people, men and women, are at the heart of these organisations to make visible impact on the performance of the community, Muslims will not achieve their full potential. It is vital these groups now give more importance to outcome than process, more importance to intellect than emotion, and planned action rather than just more routine work. Without a media strategy and smarter communication, the stereotyped and casual mode of

operation will not improve matters significantly. Organisational capacity and professionalism must be at the heart of Islamic groups.

4. Turning challenges into opportunities

To some, the issues I have outlined above may seem overly bleak. Does it perpetuate the despondency that Muslims suffer? With some Muslims it certainly can; they are obviously susceptible to a 'victim mentality' where optimism and hope do not exist.

However, in spite of the challenges I have outlined above, as well as the setbacks we have experienced since 7/7, we have a lot to be positive about. Even in this relative predicament it appears that we are heading in the right direction. Many have recognised the challenges we are facing and are trying proactively to address them. Exciting initiatives and projects up and down the country – economic, social, educational and cultural – are bringing new optimism, pride and confidence to the community.

It is encouraging that many Muslim children are now doing far better in their GCSE and 'A Level' exams and more are progressing to higher education. Educational achievement, particularly among Bangladeshi and Pakistani school children, has significantly improved compared to a decade ago, though there is still more ground to cover.

Muslims are now beginning to do well in politics and economy as well. Although the proportion is still low, the presence of Muslim parliamentarians from all parties is now felt in the Westminster village. Muslim businesses are improving their economic prospects and positively contributing to the British economy. The attempts by the MCB and other organisations up and down the country in further engaging young people and women and bringing communities together are also bearing some fruit.

While Muslim youth are facing the brunt of criticism and Muslim women are seen as victims in their religion, a new generation of confident young Muslim men and women are coming forward to clarify who they are and what they stand for. This could be the beginning of a new era when the untapped energy of the community is harnessed for the more positive work of nation building.

This paper is not a quick-fix strategy for the contemporary challenges that face us. It is about a medium and long-term strategy for the Muslim community to find its dignified and equal place in pluralist Britain, a land where merit matters. This is about strengthening the community from within so that we are able to leave the current challenges behind and work for a better Britain through our own contributions and without fear or favour. It is an agenda for working together towards shared values and common interests – for playing a full part in nation building¹⁸. At the heart of all this is the empowerment of the community through building capacity in all spheres of life, such as in educational achievement, economic sustenance and greater political and media representation.

Muslims cannot afford to remain behind others in all these areas. But nobody expects these to be overcome soon. The Muslim leadership in all fields must appreciate these challenges, grasp them fully and explore how to turn these challenges into opportunities. There must be a prioritisation in addressing these challenges and issues.

¹⁸ 'Building a Better Britain' – A pamphlet published by the Centre for the Study of Faith in Society, Von Hügel Institute, St Edmund's College, Cambridge on the speech delivered by the author in late April 2008.

In order to address these challenges the Muslim leadership must realise that unless British Muslims establish strong roots in Britain through positive social integration, where young men and women have a confident role to play and indigenous Muslims are in tune with this regeneration and renewal agenda, they will remain weak and vulnerable. Conscientious Muslims should bring their heads together and devise projects and policies, make action plans and work together to build on the available strengths within the community to fast-track the process of turning the negatives into positives. There are tremendous potentials in our communities, it is a matter of harnessing them.

This can be done at three levels:

- a) The individual and family level
- b) The community level
- c) The wider society level

4.1 The individual and family level

Everyone will bear the consequence of what he does, and no one shall bear the burden of another. (Al-Qur'an 6:165)

i) Develop knowledge and spirituality

There must be a significant investment in building our young people's lives, especially in this pluralist environment. The focus should be to enhance their general knowledge and build their character on the one hand and increase their contextual knowledge and understanding of Islam and society on the other, so that they:

- can not only safeguard themselves from the permissive influences of materialism, but are also able to flourish despite its pervasiveness, and;
- are able to confidently contribute to the common good of society.

Imparting this knowledge and understanding to our children should be the number one, immediate and ongoing, priority for all parents and they should start this from an early age of their children. This parental effort needs to be complemented in the mosques, community centres and organisations. The current level of knowledge and education in our communities stands in stark contrast to the importance and stress placed on knowledge by our religion.

In the modern materialistic world where aggressive atheism disguised as secularism is vying to occupy all our public space, and our private lives seem obsessed with emulating celebrities, the need for a deep-rooted spirituality for peace of mind and a tranquil heart has never been greater. In all religious traditions – particularly in Islam, Christianity and Judaism – spirituality has been embedded in rituals and religious practices. Sadly, with time many of them have turned mechanistic. Islam's daily prayer, compulsory charity, its month-long yearly fast, and its once-in-a-life-time pilgrimage are unique reminders for Muslims to replenish their love for Allah, enrich their spirituality and create brotherly feelings for others in humanity. In Muslim families where individuals thrive with the spirit of Islam these rituals bring unique spiritual experience that keep them emotionally content in the midst of countless distraction and unlimited pressures of modern life.

Muslims, young and old, should vie with one another in their effort to gain knowledge and skills, as was the case in Muslim history when people travelled far away places to learn new things or confirm the accuracy of their existing knowledge. Muslim students in educational institutions and voluntary community organisations should try to arrange study circles to gain deeper knowledge of the Islamic sciences and the contemporary world. Only a knowledge-based community or nation can maintain its dignity in this world.

ii) Improve education and skills

The Chinese proverb 'Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a meal; but teach a man how to fish and you will feed him for life' is instructive for all ages and every society. An educated nation with skilled people prevails, even at times of difficulty. For a community in the midst of other successful ones this is vital for their success.

Education and skills determine one's agility to think and understand the surroundings. They give confidence, self esteem and dignity in life. Educated individuals are assets to themselves, their families, community and the nation. Formal education prepares them to become effective members of society, so that they are able to give something back to the nation rather than being a burden on society. For so long sections of the Muslim community had been at the bottom of the education league tables. Things are changing positively, but there is still a long way to go. It needs a big push from all, particularly from mosques and community organisations.

There is increasing seriousness in the community for children's educational achievement, as Islam has demanded from Muslims to excel in education and learning. It is time that the whole community - parents, teachers and governors - invested more of its energy and resources in motivating Muslim children to excel in schools so that they can pursue higher education and are able to bring dignity to their own community through good jobs, businesses and social enterprises and the ethos of serving people. Our young people need to prove by their action that they are a great asset to the nation.

iii) Build positive family environment

Muslim parents should try to make their home an abode of peace and love and a place of learning. They must try to make their home a centre of forward thinking and enterprise where children are raised with positive ethos through effective parenting. They should make sure that their home becomes the sanctuary of love, respect, trust and aspiration; not a place of depression, rancour and domestic violence. Knowledgeable and confident Muslim parents will be able to raise confident and enterprising children. The new generation of children need more emotional and intellectual support and nourishment so that they are empowered to challenge cynicism of the basic tenets of their religion and values for life. Competent and confident parents can really help their children in life through solution-focused discussions with a positive ethos of life.

This is a vital responsibility on behalf of the parents today and this can only be delivered if Muslim parents invest some of their quality time in acquiring the essential skills of assertive or positive parenting which in essence is based on common-sense. This is a huge responsibility on both parents, mother and father, and it should start from the time of the conception of a child. Both parents should play a complementary and paired role in this. Muslim women provide the critical foundation necessary to strengthen families and

communities. They often played a crucial role in the past when Muslims failed in their responsibility to defend their lands – for example, when large swathes of Muslim land fell under Tatar domination in the 13th and 14th centuries Muslim women played an important role in changing the hearts and minds of those invaders who destroyed the Muslim empire. This amazing contribution was possible only because they then were equipped with the knowledge, spirituality and confidence required by Islam. The golden era of Islam in the beginning cannot be imagined without the ground-breaking role of the female companions of the Prophet. If Muslim women could play an exemplary role in building and sustaining Muslim civilisation in the past, they are fully capable of regenerating the community today.

Imam Qurtubi's beautiful reminder, 'a smart person learns from his own mistakes, a wise person learns from other's mistakes', is instructive. Muslims need to learn from the experiences of their own and of others. In the midst of the huge pressure on family traditions and values our families should work together and create family circles where they can share their knowledge and experience with others through discussions on parenting and other civic responsibilities.

iv) Uphold good neighbourly behaviour

Islam has given tremendous importance to the rights of neighbours, to the extent that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was concerned as to whether neighbours should be given the right of inheritance. It is essential that Muslims understand this social responsibility to their neighbours and respond to the needs of all in their vicinity. Being a good neighbour is part of being a Muslim. The Qur'an mentions "*Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him; and do good - to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (you meet) and what your right hands possess: For Allah loveth not the arrogant, the vainglorious.*" (Al-Quran 4:36). Muslim individuals and families must increase their interaction with their neighbours, Muslims and non-Muslims, and help one another in enjoining good and safeguarding against wrong.

Initiatives like 'Safer Neighbourhood' chime with Muslim ethos and are vital for our day to day well being. Muslims should be the first ones to become active in such local community initiatives, such as maintaining cleanliness in the streets and safety in their locality. Sadly, in many cities today, people do not even know who their next-door neighbours are, even though Islam requires them to not only know their neighbours but also to work with them to build and sustain a safer neighbourhood and community. The Prophet (peace be upon him) was known for his best manners and he has left us many personal examples and precepts.¹⁹

¹⁹ 'My Lord has taught me good manners; and He has mannered me well' (Al-Sam'ani in *Adab al Imla*)
"Mankind has not been given anything better than good manners." (*Sahih al-Jami'*)

"The most beloved of you to me and the closest of you to me in the Hereafter are those of you who have the best manners; the most hated of you to me and farthest from me in the Hereafter are those of you who have the worst manners, those who speak and do not even care about what they are saying." (*Sahih al-Jami'*)

"Nothing will be placed in the Balance (in the Day of Resurrection) heavier than good conduct." (*Al-Tirmidhi*)

Being a trusted and helpful neighbour is at the core of Islam's social life and should be the motto of every Muslim, irrespective of a neighbour's behaviour towards him or her. It is expected that Muslims excel in their personal manners and their integrity of character.

v) Develop a positive and inclusive Identity²⁰

Many first generation Muslims spent their initial years here uncertain as to whether they would stay in Britain or go back to their countries of origin. However, as they started bringing their families, and their children started to grow up in Britain, most of them gradually came to terms with the reality that going back was just a dream. In this phase of indecision, the dead bodies of most deceased would be sent back for burial in their place of birth. Gradually that also ceased. They came to realise that Britain had become their home.

This initial uncertainty did have some negative impact on many second generation young Muslims. Some of them were caught in the identity confusion as to where they belong. It took some time to develop an understanding among many that being a Muslim and British at the same time was not contradictory at all. There is still some misunderstanding in a small section of the community, but most get along with their life confidently with their multiple identities.

Identity is a serious issue for all people. Loss of identity is detrimental for individuals and any community. One's multiple identities, as long as they are not meant to create division among people, do not contradict with cohesion with others in a society where there is freedom of religious practice and freedom of expression. In fact, confidence in one's own background enhances positive social interaction with others. Political dissatisfaction and social deprivation are matters for robust discussion, but they should not inhibit young Muslims from playing their positive role as British citizens.

Every human being is exceptional and feeling positive about one's identity is vital, especially in the adolescence phase when the world becomes a wider place and young people go through a period of many internal changes – physical, emotional and intellectual. Parents and near ones should empathetically work with young people and help them develop an inclusive and positive identity so that the latter grow up with pride in their roots and respect for others in society.

4.2 Community level

The diversity in human beings is a divine decree (Al-Qur'an 49:13)

i) Improve community harmony and build internal capacity

The Muslim community is hugely diverse and Islam does not have a religious hierarchy. These two features have their advantages and disadvantages. Muslims are uniquely bonded by a few

²⁰ Identity is a hotly debated issue in Britain. Muslim leaders are sometimes accused of promoting 'identity politics'. Some prominent politicians and sections of the media often raise this issue in negative manner and attract media headlines. Unfortunately, once again, Muslim youth are often asked certain questions on this in a way others are not asked. Amartya Sen's (Nobel Laureate in Economics) *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* is an interesting book on this and there has been some works by Prof Tariq Modood of University of Bristol. The author's book *Race, Religion and Muslim Identity in Britain* (2005), published by Awakening, discusses the issue from an Islamic view point.

fundamentals of Islam and the broader worldview of life. Mosques and community organisations should work harder to nurture this bond in the community through providing proper education of the Islamic spirit and creating brotherliness between people so that gaps within this diversity are minimised.

Significant numbers of Muslims are still coming to and settling in Britain from various parts of the world, especially from lands ravaged by war and run by corrupt and dictatorial regimes. After such traumas, many find it difficult to cope with the pressures of a new environment, significantly different from their countries of origin. They need necessary support from authorities as well as from settled communities. A significant number of indigenous people, known to be mostly young women, are also turning to Islam for many reasons. They also need empathy and strong support from the community.²¹

There should be more meaningful co-operation and co-ordination among Muslims on the one hand and Muslims and non-Muslim on the other, at local and national levels. Self-indulgence for narrow and short-term gains should not be allowed to divide the community and society. Conscientious Muslims need to adopt innovative ideas and realistic action plans to consolidate and enhance the level of unity they have within them. Mosques, community organisations and institutions need to inject more creativity in thinking, more initiative in action and more robustness in the defence of the community.

Love and respect for others are in the spirit of Islam. Maintaining a unique balance between our responsibilities towards other Muslims, i.e., the *ummah*, and duties towards the people around us in our neighbourhoods and society, i.e., the *qaum*, is vital for every individual Muslim and the community. This needs a deeper understanding of the religion and Muslim history, higher levels of integrity and willingness. In day to day life, this is an issue of simple common sense. At the end of the day, we are all brothers and sisters in humanity.

Obviously there will be tensions and disagreement among people; this is only natural in any dynamic society. In fact, this is often essential for progress as it generates robust debate, discussion and healthy competition. With the evolving nature of our communities and the contemporary debate surrounding Muslims, the Muslim leadership should be equipped with the art of negotiation and reconciliation in those situations.

ii) Enhance youth involvement in the community

Mosques and community organisations must move faster to engage with the younger generations of Muslims, male and female, so that they feel confident in taking their rightful place in community affairs and extend this into wider society. Although there is now general acknowledgement of this necessity, there needs to be practical steps so that young people are really seen at the helm of community projects and initiatives, in the upper layers of mosque management and community leadership. This is a two way process. Young people also need to move beyond their idealistic world and comfort of scepticism, and instead of simply complaining about the older generations, they need to put their heads and hearts in volunteering with genuine enthusiasm and dedication. A bit of extra patience is helpful. It is true that organisations have their embedded cultures which are resistant to change, but those who want change need to find ways to overcome this. They need to change themselves.

²¹ <http://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf>

The demand from a new generation of professional young people to lead Muslim organisations and for more English speaking Imams to lead mosque congregations up and down the country is very high indeed. It is vital to engage more with young Muslims who are the future of our diverse communities and the country. While our communities cannot ignore the needs of first generation Muslim scholars, they cannot ignore the need for more 'home-grown' Imams with better communication skills. Mosques and Islamic centres must increase their organisational capacity and improve their standards in serving people. They need to develop a professional service ethos in their management systems. This is only possible if young talented men and women are fully involved in the mosque affairs or voluntary community organisations so that they can become catalysts for faith and community regeneration in twenty-first century Britain.

iii) Reclaim women's positive role in community building

Muslim women have a history of building the *ummah* on a par with Muslim men since the early days of Islam, and given their better performance in education now, it is obvious that they have the potentials to do this again – albeit within Islamic principles. A big discussion, often patronising, is going on in the media on how Islam treats its women. Muslim women themselves are not yet fully able to challenge this narrative, but the fact that many converts to Islam are highly professional women is an instructive message in itself to these self-styled cynical experts on Islam. It is vital that the community grows in confidence and Muslim women not only counter this one-sided discourse vigorously but also put their points across effectively so that they are able to create a balanced debate on this and other issues involving them. Muslim women asserting their position prescribed by the Qur'an and Sunnah would be a great asset to the community and wider society. This is also vital for preparing better future generations of Muslims.

The community needs to retain its balance in all affairs of life. We cannot afford to be inhibited by cultural baggage and dogmatism; in the same way, we also cannot allow unrestricted laxity in man-woman relationships that will do more harm than good in the long term. Men and women have complementary roles in society. Antagonism, competition and contest between the sexes destabilise families and society as a whole. As a result, women generally suffer more than men. We ignore this balance at our peril. Let educated and confident Muslim women speak up for themselves and join other positive forces in society to build our nation.

iv) Create endowments and build institutions

Things are improving, but it is now time the cycle of under-achievement in education, economy and other social aspects in our communities is broken. It is true that our mosques, organisations and institutions are run by volunteers with shoestring budgets and thus lack capacity, but it is also time to inject more professionalism into them to bring about greater efficiency and effectiveness. It is time we involve more youth and women, and harness their energy, enthusiasm and creativity. It is also the time to create our own strong infrastructure to help and support one another in educational, economic and social projects.

A number of Muslim charities have been established in the last few decades; two of them are internationally acclaimed. But almost all the money the Muslim charities raise is spent for overseas needs. While this is commendable in its own right, the population here in Britain also needs much additional support in educational and economic capacity building and

addressing some of the malaise that are adversely affecting our youth in many inner cities. A significant number of inner-city Muslim youth are facing problems of substance misuse, gangsterism and other social ills. It is time we invested some of our financial resources to empower our parents through effective parenting skills courses and help our mosques and centres to alert and educate the congregation on issues that are essential to the community and wider society.

Our community can pride itself for its generosity in building prayer places and mosques. However, it is important that we now develop an increased eagerness to finance our bona fide broad-based Muslim bodies which can articulate the community's hopes and concerns in the public domain. It is important that the community increases its overall capacity to challenge the seriously flawed narrative about Islam and Muslims created by the right wing media. We cannot leave this field as widely open for much longer.

Mosques and community organisations need to increase their efforts in turning themselves into effective institutions with more transparency and accountability; we need to bring together the experience and wisdom of the older generations and the energy and creativity of younger generations in order to create a positive synergy. The unique Islamic concept of endowment (*waqf*, plural *awqaf*), with sufficient capital to keep initiatives running for generations, should be brought back in earnest. Self sufficient and professionally run institutions grow naturally and help communities pull together in the long run. It is also time that Muslim institutions moved beyond serving only their own communities to also serving wider society, as exemplars of striving towards the common good.

v) Invest in media and politics

The community is still unable to have its voice effectively heard in the national media and politics due to a lack of human resources and financial capacity. As a result, sections of the media and some politicians find Muslims a soft target and find it easy to take cheap swipes at the community and Islam. Whatever media outlets Muslim groups have, ethnic or faith based, they lack ambition and are localised and do not have national impact. The 'Muslim media', if this term can be used, must mature beyond its own small world to serve the whole nation with quality and broadness of appeal so that it is taken more seriously, first by the community itself and then by others.

The main issue, however, is not the creation of a 'Muslim media' per se. Young talented Muslims with a good grasp of the language, an understanding of the wider society and good communication skills should choose to enter the range of professions. There is nothing wrong in the few professions mostly preferred by our communities, e.g., medicine and accountancy, but young people should also be encouraged to go into teaching, journalism, politics and other areas so that we can spread our contributions across society. In a 24/7 media dominated world no community or group should be left behind in professions that carry social and political clout.

Politics shapes the destiny of a nation and is a serious profession. But what we crucially need is to make the community's participation more effective and sustainable. Talented people with political astuteness and communication skills should be more involved in mainstream politics, excelling in policy knowledge and integrity of character in order to help bring about a fresh appeal to politics which has been damaged by the recent MPs' expenses scandal. Islam teaches us to remain principled and dignified in whatever we do in life, including politics.

Effective communication is at the heart of media and politics. For us it also includes putting objective and informed views of who we are. In the midst of general ignorance and often misinformation about Islam and Muslims, our greater participation in the media and politics will help ease the fears about us among ordinary Britons.

vi) Stimulate thinking and build an inclusive culture

Intellectual stagnation or crisis of thought among Muslims has been a stark reality for a long time. There is now an enhanced realisation of this crisis within many Muslims. We need to move out of the status quo and think fresh; we must move beyond our comfort zones. Islam encourages Muslims to be the inheritors of knowledge and to engage in intellectual pursuit. Muslims should, by definition, be a reading and learning people. Setting up scholarly and policy making bodies and initiatives to help the community to improve its participation in public life is important.

Through creating a culture of knowledge seeking and thoughtful actions we need to isolate the handful of extremists who, with their near ignorance of Islam and dislike for the West, propagate an evil rhetoric and invite the already prejudiced media to demonise our religion and community. They thrive on being in the news. On the other hand, a small section, impatient of our current malaise and ignorant of the basic teachings of Islam, look for shortcuts and emotionally charged solutions to our problems. It is encouraging that the declaration of *takfir* (pronouncing as unbelievers) on others has reduced significantly in recent times. This self-righteous designation of other Muslims as 'unbelievers' does more harm in creating internal disharmony than anything else. What is most needed is a proper understanding of Islamic *adab* (good manners), *adab al-ikhtilaf* (ethics of disagreement),²² broadmindedness and patience. Without thinking fresh and aiming high this will not be achieved.

Islam's robust message of fairness and justice had in the past helped shape communities and nations. The same can be achieved to create harmonious communities in modern time, if only its adherents are able to understand and practise them in their daily lives. Stronger and confident communities think ahead and can work with other cultures to produce a new distinctive and inclusive ethical norm. How the British Muslim culture will grow depends on how confidently the community progresses in all walks of life and interacts with others. The danger to any culture is its extreme rigidity or laxity. In various spheres of our life shared values and common interests drawn from the Abrahamic legacy can bring peace and harmony.

4.3 The wider society level

Help one another in acts of righteousness and piety, and do not help one another in wrongdoing and transgression. (Al-Qur'an 5:2)

i) Improve contribution to public service

The message of our religion is to serve humanity and to care for the whole of creation, including our environment. Muslims must improve their social participation and should proactively improve their presence in important public services by sharing their hopes,

²² The Ethics of Disagreement in Islam, Taha Jabir al Alwani (Edited by A S al Shaikh-Ali), The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993.

concerns and values as ordinary citizens. There is indeed a high presence of Muslims in the health professions and in the business and charity sectors. A similar presence is required of them in other walks of life, e.g., in teaching, the police service, media and politics. They should not be deterred by challenges, real or perceived, of prejudice or glass ceilings. No community or society is immune from these challenges. It is a fact that Britain is far better than many developed countries with its forceful equality policies and their better enforcement. Robust implementation of these provisions is everyone's responsibility.

In London and some other big cities Muslims constitute a good proportion of the local population and with more young people in their midst they cannot afford to stay in the margins. This is what some Muslims in the fringes of our community and many in far-right politics would very much like to see. The London 2012 Olympics is bringing tremendous opportunities for the country, and as the five Olympic boroughs have a significant proportion of Muslims, its legacy can benefit all our communities for decades to come. Muslims should not remain passive spectators in major events like this.

There are success stories within some mosques, institutions and organisations. They need to share their good practices with others who may be struggling. Muslim participation in multi-faith bodies like Citizens UK for achieving practical day to day benefits for all, such as a living wage for low paid workers, is vital. There are similar excellent examples up and down the country. This partnership in service-oriented works in local communities is instrumental in bringing harmony among people. In addition to a civic responsibility, this is our religious imperative as well.

ii) Enhance social and economic enterprises

The flurry of activities in some sections of the Muslim community needs to be shared with others, Muslims and non-Muslims. Success begets success and young people particularly are encouraged by the spirit of entrepreneurship by their own people. The success of any community or nation depends on some group qualities, e.g., collective vision, organised effort to build collective capacity, and professionalism at all levels. Successful individuals and organisations within the community should invest their resources in helping those who are less fortunate for various reasons. Benefit-driven social responsibility is in the nature of Islamic teachings and the community needs to excel in this area.

The disturbing phenomenon of growing inequality within individuals and within various Muslim communities needs to be tackled. Islam hugely encourages individual creativity and enterprise; but it also strongly advises its adherents to share their wealth and experience with others so that social and economic progress is not limited to only a few.

There are a number of natural antidotes to minimise the unusual gaps that may grow between the ultra-rich and the extremely poor in Islam. And yet, in all socio-economic indicators sections of the Muslim community are the most deprived and below the poverty line. While the problem is huge and needs to be addressed nationally, the Muslim community should also contribute its own efforts to rooting out this scourge through short and long term actions, e.g., by helping young people in education and relevant skills. Compulsory charity by the rich to the poor, the *Zakah*, is one of the pillars of Islam. Beyond this, there are the beautiful concepts of *sadaqa* (generally known as 'continuous' charity) and *qard-e-hasana* (beautiful loan which is interest-free) that could help the community in levelling out some of the economic disparities among communities and individuals.

Muslim women have the ability to make a significant change on this front, as they are performing better in the education sector. Their huge reservoir of energy and creativity is still untapped.²³ It is time this is redressed – for the benefit of the Muslim community and society at large.

iii) Champion in civic rights and responsibilities

Successful communities make sure they strengthen themselves and give their best to society. At the same time they are vigilant that their own rights are not trampled or taken away under any pretext. We should all try our best to defend our rights. The Muslim community should work with others, locally and nationally, to champion civic rights and responsibilities for all.

In the post-7/7 political climate, when the community is under severe scrutiny, it needs to ensure that the community does not resort to easier options, i.e., turning inwards and becoming more insular or resorting to becoming an anti-social menace to others. That will take them towards a social cul-de-sac. Whatever the negative portrayal or challenges, Muslims need to work harder and better with others to create a better social environment. Let the world know that they are for the good of society and that they are assets to our national life. They should multiply their efforts and work collaboratively with mainstream partners as champions of safer neighbourhood, civil rights and social justice. Hiding in comfort zones or grumbling for extra-attention as some would like us to do, will not bring the positive outcomes we require. It is a recipe for failure, for the community as well as for the society.

Attempts to create a prosperous and just society for all are at the core of Islamic teachings. Muslims must make sure that when they talk about rights and justice they do not only talk for themselves. They must be exemplars of the common good for the whole society²⁴. Sadly, they are often seen to be fighting for only their own corner; at least that is the perception. While on certain issues that are specific to them they need to defend their rights, the demand for a common humanity requires that we work together to build a better space for everyone. Muslim community organisations and institutions need to put extra effort into making and expanding links with other community groups, faith and non-faith, and civil society bodies. There are many common issues that affect us all, e.g., fighting inequality and social deprivation, better educational achievement for all and eradicating the numerous social problems. No community or even the government can do all this alone.

All this needs deeper and broader social interaction and proactive engagement with all in society. This needs courage and broadness of mind, proactive participation and passion to make a change.

iv) Build peace and create happiness

The modern world has progressed in leaps and bounds technologically, but when it comes to our inner happiness at the individual and family level we are not keeping pace with this material progress. As the economy grows, we produce more. The more we produce, the more we consume. The more we consume, the more our demands grow. The more our demand grows, the more we become discontented. This has become a vicious circle and being caught in it we are losing the deeper meaning of life. We are living longer, but not getting happier.

²³ http://www.youngfoundation.org/files/images/pressreleases/VFVW_press_release_251108.pdf

²⁴ Al-Qur'an (3:64)

Commercialisation has gripped our life, and so has over-sexualisation. Easy options for transient peace, such as drug addiction and alcoholism, are increasing and putting a huge burden on our national health and health budget. People's tolerance level and respect for one another are affected adversely. Social thinkers and politicians are finding it harder to strike a balance between freedom of choice and respect, civil liberty and security. We need to step back and think seriously about how we can bring harmony to our inner selves, our families, our community and our society. We need to think fresh and aim high, spiritually and intellectually. The spirit of religious teachings - love for human beings and ecological balance - needs to be reclaimed and strengthened. Spiritual solace is a crying need of all human beings, and on this issue all of us can relate to one another irrespective of our backgrounds.

5. Conclusion

Over the centuries, Britain has been enriched by the experiences of new people coming to its shore. The Huguenots, the Jews, the Irish and the Black – all faced their own difficulties and challenges. It now appears to be the turn of Muslims. It is perhaps the British way of welcoming new communities and testing their resolve?

Whatever the current mud thrown at us in recent years, and for whatever reasons, it is encouraging that the overwhelming majority of British people are not buying into this grossly negative narrative about British Muslims. Although there is much to be improved, Muslims in inner-city neighbourhoods and various work places are living and working peacefully as ordinary citizens. British civil society is mature enough to differentiate between criminals and the communities they belong to, radical views and extremism, religious conservatism and subversion.

As an integral part of British society, the Muslim community has now an obligation to move forward and become stakeholders in the political, economic and social life of Britain and to join hands with other people in order to create and sustain social harmony, peace and justice. They can only do this if they are able to build their own capacity – particularly through unlocking the potentials of the youth and women. They need to appreciate that they can only be equal partners with others if their socio-economic conditions are improved and they are seen as serious contributors to Britain's prosperity. There is an urgent need for a genuine soul-searching exercise in the British Muslim community, a robust introspection, to perform better in all walks of life.

Our strength is the inherent richness in the teachings of Islam, diversity in the Muslim communities, talents in our youth and wisdom in our community. It is just a matter of harnessing these and our untapped energy and creativity. Britain's merit-based stable social environment, its culture of recognition for what people do rather than who they are and its democratic heritage are ingredients for people to flourish in this isle.

It is important that Muslims learn to play by the rules and take current challenges as a passing phenomenon and teething problem of a new and evolving community. Can the Muslim community hold its nerve and confront these challenges head on, with dignity and Islamic spirit? Is the Muslim community prepared to take up the challenges with determination to perform better? One hopes that this is the beginning of a new dawn for this youthful section of British citizens.

“Help one another to virtue and God-consciousness and do not help one another to wrongdoing and transgression” (Al-Qur’an, 5:2)

6. Epilogue

Since I finished writing the monograph and was waiting for this to be published, two major events, one in Norway and the other in the UK, shocked us and made some impact on the ongoing discourse surrounding European Muslims. There is now a growing realisation among many that scapegoating Muslims as ‘others’ or ‘villains’ is not helping Europe in tackling its social, political and economic challenges. As for British Muslims, there seems to be more light in the tunnel for us to flourish in the UK.

The cold-blooded mass murder of 77 mainly-young Norwegians by far-right Christian extremist, Anders Behring Breivik, in Norway on 22 July 2011 has shaken the conscience of Europe's political classes that they should not have taken their eyes off far right extremism that haunted them in the past. The slayings in Norway²⁵ were a horrendous wake-up call to far-right violence and ideology. Inspired by the rhetoric of far right politicians such as Geert Wilders in Netherlands and groups like the EDL in Britain in their intolerance against Muslims and Islam, Europe has been ignoring the other dark side within itself. In their enthusiasm for seeing their Muslim citizens negatively Europe and America had inadvertently allowed and, some might argue, encouraged other ‘monsters’ to grow. People are now gradually coming to terms with the truth that their neighbours and colleagues of Islamic faith are of same human instincts and with the reality that terrorism is not a monopoly of certain group or faith. The fact tells that the overwhelming numbers of terrorist acts are done by those other than Muslims²⁶.

In Britain, the shooting of 29-year-old Mark Duggan by armed police in north London on the evening of 4th August sparked off a chain of riots, looting and mayhem in London and subsequently other English cities. These widely-reported riots²⁷ during early August opened the eyes of many Britons of the social problems in their midst. The wanton destruction up and down the country, caused by sections of our youth and aided by electronic media (such as Blackberry messenger, Twitter, etc), is now being recognised as a new phase in our social malaise. It was the beginning of the Islamic month of Ramadan, the month of self-restraint from one’s ego and anger, when Muslims displayed some inspirational examples by their responsible and civic behaviour and loyalty to Britain’s well-being.

During the riots local Muslim worshippers in east London calmly and determinedly saw off rioters from the streets of Whitechapel in East London. Tariq Jahan, the father of a young Muslim man murdered trying to protect his community in Birmingham, received widespread praise for his dignity and call for restraint in the wake of his son's death. His leadership in restraining Asian youth from taking revenge on the murder of three young Pakistani men averted a race riot. Local Turkish shopkeepers in north London protected the business area from the looters. As a result of all this, many in the media and political establishments are now

²⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jul/23/norway-attacks-utoya-gunman?intcmp=239>

²⁶ http://walt.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/02/09/some_good_news_about_islamic_terror

²⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_England_riots

beginning to accept that their unfair treatment of Muslims in recent years has indeed been embarrassing. A sense of objectivity and balance seems to be gradually returning.

Columnist Peter Osborne suggested that the moral decay at the top of our society²⁸ is as bad as at the bottom in our country and ex-Policeman Robert Lambert praised Muslim communities for their inspirational roles²⁹ in tackling looters and bigots. In a powerful article in *The Daily Mail* on 14 August columnist and writer, A N Wilson³⁰, eulogised Birmingham father Tariq Jahan for his "solemn, peaceful message that will make everyone who stereotypes Muslims as terrorists and fanatics feel ashamed of themselves".

These are positive developments in Britain and they reflect the feelings of overwhelming sections of British public. But the naysayers in the right wing media and think-tanks, who laid low during this period, would probably not easily give up in their negative portrayal of Muslims. Their McCarthy-esque technique of accusing Muslim individuals and groups of 'Islamism' or 'Islam-fascism', the ill-defined and catch-all terms, may continue for some time. The civil society, including Muslims, need to be on their guard.

The world as we knew radically changed after 9/11. Lack of a sense of security, division among people and weakening of trust on political and economic leadership – have made the world less safe for us. America is counting the political and economic cost of the 'war on terror' they waged after that fateful morning of September 2001, unleashing fear of its fire power and undermining the Geneva Convention. History has piled up in the last ten years; the economic tectonic plate is gradually shifting away from America and there is every sign that global politics is also rapidly changing.

A just and terror-free world is everybody's dream. On the 10th anniversary of 9/11 the world has come to realise that this can only be built on love and respect for fellow human beings, irrespective of their backgrounds. This remains the biggest challenge of our time.

²⁸ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/peterosborne/100100708/the-moral-decay-of-our-society-is-as-bad-at-the-top-as-the-bottom/>

²⁹ <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2011/08/201181210928899563.html>

³⁰ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2025393/UK-riots-Haroon-Jahan-death-Legacy-society-believes-nothing.html#ixzz1UuhiCaD3>