

MUSLIM CULTURAL YOUTH

PAVING THE WAY TO THE FUTURE

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We LIVE IN INCREDIBLY INTERESTING times. A world that is smaller than it has ever been but could not be divided further apart. A world that is prosperous, industrious and commercially successful but where most of its populations starve or face the most difficult of circumstances. Western worlds build the guns and bullets, the eastern worlds buy them instead of food or technology, ensuring the divisions between ruler and ruled, king and pauper, remain distinct. What does all of this mean for the many different ethnic minorities who live and work in Western Europe, and more particularly, who are different by virtue of faith, colour as well as culture. I want in this pithy essay to spell out a number of issues relating to the experiences of Muslim youth, and the myriad challenges that are going to have to be faced in order to bring about a peaceful resolution to a range of conflicts.

There are appropriately twenty million Muslims in Western Europe, with the biggest of numbers in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Britain. All of these nation-states share a common history – they were all 'old Europe' and continue to dominate the political economy of New Europe as it continues to enlarge in an attempt to compete on the global economic stage, with both the emerging economies of India and China

thundering their paths to rapid growth as the last remaining superpower, the USA, struggles to cope with its loss of supremacy, something it had in abundance in the last century. But it is in Britain, where we have approximately two million Muslims

that we are now faced with important questions regarding identity politics, social exclusion, economic marginalisation and cultural relativism. In particular, since the events of 7/7, Multiculturalism has come under severe attack from the right and the left, and concerns in relation to 'Muslim terrorists' fill the public imagination, pumped up by neo-Orientalist media discourses and neo-conservative political ideologies. And yet, who, apart from political philosophers, can adequately define or imagine a genuine multicultural society, where respect for difference is matched by a national cultural framework that is fully inclusive. Much is being focused on the Muslim who is disloyal, who seeks not to integrate, women who wish to regress to wearing the face veil, and a body of youth that is out of control whether through *jihadi* sensibilities or criminological misdirection. Little attention is being paid to widening economic, social and cultural polarities.

Yet, the complex reality is more sophisticated than any of the *prima facie* outcomes. With one-in-three British Muslims under the age of fifteen, there had been a demographic time bomb ticking away well before 7/7. Young British-born Muslims are disconnected and disgruntled, they cannot engage with rural-born uneducated leaders and elders whose attention is on matters elsewhere. Local Islamic institutions are not fit for purpose. A radical Salafi-orientated Islamic outlook is promulgated by dodgy bookshops and the ability to download dodgy *fatawas* from websites, both using the medium of the English language to communicate their fanatic ideals. But this is not always a Muslim problem, but one created by the workings of society itself and the needs of a nation-state to perpetuate the emergence of an 'enemy-other', and in the post-9/11 climate, one that is painted as living on a street near you. This fear psychosis has been used to legitimise an illegal war, and to mask the inadequacies of British foreign policy in relation to Muslim lands. At the same

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time, due to a lack of resources, Muslim minority institutions continue to languish behind, with efforts on the part of the British nation-state often limited in scope or reach. It tends to be piecemeal and plays into hands of existing and emerging elites who wish for a seat at the top table. The reality is that, on the ground, matters are getting worse, home and abroad.

All of these challenges read in another way are opportunities, and this is important to concentrate on if we wish to move forward. Over five hundred years of imperial and colonial endeavours, the Europeans systematically enslaved Muslim minds and hearts. After the eventful collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the pan-Arabism of the early twentieth century demonstrated that

(i.e., teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, lawlessness, and disrespect for authority), but Muslims can step away from these issues with the confidence that most people wish to be dissociated from these behaviours and outcomes too. And furthermore, that there exist institutions, organisations, laws and practices to protect the innocent, promote the virtuous and encourage a civil polity based on the many differences and needs that make who we are as humans so very unique. The essential crux of the matter is that if Muslim minorities get it right in Western Europe, and in Britain in particular, for we have a head start, then the rest of the world's Muslims and nation-states can follow suit.



Photo by Aaron Wodan-Shauritz

Muslims thought of one thing only – a return to the caliphate. But this vision was clouded by ideologues that saw this as an immediate reaction to the problem, not a pro-action. Muslims are simply ill-equipped (technologically, intellectually and spiritually) to engage in this state of mind. Islam is about humanity, not just Muslims. The future is forward, not backwards. The challenge today, as Islam continues to lose ground in the face of collected efforts to eliminate its presence, is to ensure that western-European born and educated Muslim minorities can act as the vanguard in this important epoch of history. The post-war period has seen independence in Muslim lands, but modernity and democracy are nowhere to be seen. Instead, despotism, militarism and factionalism are rife. Much of the Muslim theological hierarchy is morally and spiritually questionable, putting aside the fact that there should not be a clergy in Islam at all. Young Muslims in Western Europe need to return to *ijtihad* (individual interpretation) but also to appreciate the freedoms and liberties that exist for all. Young Muslims need to realise that, yes, western societies have huge problems

Britain is a multicultural society, with a vast array of cultures, languages, ethnicities, religions and identities that form it. For it to become ever more successful, one that can act as a beacon for others to follow, Muslims have to reach out and engage with others, to read Islam for themselves and to remember that many non-Muslims have greater respect for others, a sense of kindness and openness that many Muslims have simply abandoned. And finally, to engender trust and confidence in each other, Muslims have to simply let go the view that it is incumbent upon them to universalise the religion at all times. In its current manifestations Islam today simply does not have the answers to all of the problems we face. But the tools, the structures, the fabric, and the mechanisms are still there in principle. It all depends on what we do with them once we grasp their power to change. There is much to do and the time is now!

