

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Freedom of Belief as a cornerstone of Democratic Society

Distinguished Honourable Muftis, parliamentarians, learned scholars, academics, ladies and gentlemen,

I am privileged and honoured to be here in Jalal-Abad attending this very important conference on “Freedom of belief and expression”. This subject matter is close to my heart, although I am not an expert nor an academic. I am merely an ordinary Muslim, who has been brought up in the West, namely the United Kingdom, where I have been living for the last 30 years.

I consider myself to be a British Muslim. Britain is my home and is also the home to 2 million other Muslims coming from the four corners of the world, including some 20,000 English Muslims.

Today’s Britain is very much a multicultural and multi religious society. Indeed Britain is a very tolerant society and people celebrate the richness of diversity that exists in Britain and is seen by the vast majority to be a very rich tapestry and people enjoy striving to achieve unity through diversity.

I am a local councillor in the Cheetham ward with 20,000 people, from some 30 different nationalities. Irish, Ukrainian, Turkish, Afghan, Libyan, Algerian, Indian, Bosnian, Pakistani, Polish, Greek and Bangladeshi... It really is a mini world.

If you walk down to the local shopping area, you will be amazed at the variety of food that is available throughout the year, some 2 dozen fruits, similarly 2 dozen different vegetables and not to mention the variety that exists in the restaurants.

There are 1,500 Mosques in the UK, 100s of them are purpose built, with both traditional and modern designs, London's Central Mosque is a tourist attraction along with Buckingham Palace, West Minister Cathedral and Parliament House.

There are facilities for Muslim prayer at airports, government departments, education establishments, even facilities in the parliament. Halal food is available in hospitals, prisons, schools and in shops. Muslims are represented in all walks of life from taxi drivers to corner shopkeepers. Large business companies to Lords and Members of Parliament, medical staff to British Armed forces.

Together with the state education system, we have some 72 independent Muslim schools, including four state funded Muslim schools, together with other faith schools for Jewish, Catholic, Church of England and other denominations.

Even the Foreign Office has set up Hajj missions in Saudi Arabia to assist the British Hajjis', some 20,000 attend hajj every year from Britain.

Royal family

HRH Prince Charles, last year designed an Islamic garden at the Chelsea flower show, and won second prize.

For the first time an Eid party was arranged. This was for 200 Muslim teenagers and young adults from all over the country, at St. James palace with Islamic entertainment, halal food and drinks.

More work is being done by two trusts set up by HRH Prince Charles, (Prince's Trust, & Visual Islamic Traditional Arts project 'Vita' run by Prince's Foundation)

This year her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is celebrating her Jubilee, and is inviting some 700 people to her Buckingham palace, some 100 of these will be Muslims.

On the instructions of Foreign Secretary Jack Straw MP, the British Council is also working on Youth exchange programmes between youths from Muslim countries and local youths, in order to build bridges for the future for both communities.

Local Authorities there are some 200+ Muslim Councillors up and down the UK, representing the three major political parties, who not only represent all their constituents but also act as a bridge between the local authority and the Muslim Community, Many local consultation meetings are also held between the local authority leadership and the Muslim community representatives to deal with need and requirements of the Muslim Community.

Similar arrangements exist between the various police forces and the Muslim community, after the attack of September 11th. The Home Secretary David Blunkett instructed the police forces to ensure that every effort is made for the protection of the Muslim community and our Mosques and community centres.

There are many multi faith forums working in the UK, so that the religious leadership can play their part in bringing the communities closer together and to remove the misunderstanding and prejudices between different faith communities. Religious leaders regularly attend one anothers' functions.

There is a very good relationship between the government and the Muslim community, we regularly meet with the government ministers and discuss issues concerning us, both in the country and also international issues of special concern to the Muslim Community, such as Kashmir, Palestine and Chechnya.

The relationship is not always smooth, we do have our differences:

Recently the Home Secretary made statements about arranged marriages. He was told in no uncertain terms by the Muslim and Asian Community that it was no business of the government to tell people who they should or should

not marry. It is a personal matter. Quite frankly my personal opinion is that these days young people do not listen to their parents, they certainly are not going to listen to the government.

When I was told of the trip to Jalal-Abad, I felt it was an opportunity not to be missed as I have never visited Central Asia. I have very little knowledge about this part of the world, this is an opportunity for me to learn and also an opportunity to share my experience as a Muslim living in Britain with you.

Together we can discuss the issues of the conference. I know that it takes a great deal of effort to organise a conference like this, and many people from the OSCE have put in long hours to put this very important conference together. I would personally like to thank them.

Ladies and gentleman,

We live in a time when life is moving at a tremendous pace, the whole world is shrinking before our very eyes with the effect of globalisation, with the ever increasing rate of expansion of technology, it is becoming easier and easier to meet and communicate with one another. We live in a time which has given us many opportunities and at the same time many new challenges.

With this shrinking world, all of us are in a way linked to one another, a way in which we were never before. The terrible events of September 11th was watched by the whole world in horror. Nearly three thousand innocent lives including 100s' Muslims were lost before our eyes. This incident has also brought home to us the gulf which still exists between us. With it the need for all of us to examine the global relationship. Why would 19 young men in their prime want to take their own lives and the life of three thousand innocent individuals going about their business?

We have to ask ourselves what is wrong with our international relationships? I also believe that we as Muslims need to look closely within ourselves and our society.

We have 1.2 billion Muslims living all over the world, 56 Muslim countries and more than this number of countries where Muslims today live as a minority.

The twenty-first century has thrown up a number of challenges for us. Some of these include:-

How we live as a minority

How an Islamic government treats other minorities

How the Muslim faith plays a role in Government

According to the latest global ranking figures provided by Freedom House, the Muslim world has one of the lowest numbers of free democratic countries, which has led to some experts arguing that there is a “ Democratic deficit” in the Muslim world.

We have to look at these issues and their causes and ask ourselves how far these are true? Why we are less Democratic now than what we were 1400 years ago?

Is Islam and a democratic society compatible?

There are on going discussions in intellectual circles of the Muslim and non Muslim World.

Is it the failure of the elite and the Muslim ruling class in striking a balance between the understanding of religious roots of the Muslim Nation and the adoption of a modern culture that re-invigorates and re-launches the strengths of the Muslim society in the 21st century?

I believe that there is nothing lacking in our Islamic culture that may prevent us from achieving a highly developed society, both spiritually and materially. The current democratic deficit is more a product of certain political and historical circumstances, which, once redressed, will give way to a humanistic and pluralistic environment where Muslims can play their roles positively without recourse to totalitarian practices.

In the past Islam has been an egalitarian and progressive force. The Islamic history had exhibited a golden example for pluralism. The prophet himself made treaty of Medina, which included people of other faiths as citizens of the state, including the Jewish community who were members of the Islamic state.

The treaty of Medina established the importance of consent and co-operation for governance. According to this treaty Muslims and non-Muslims are equal citizens of the Islamic state, with identical rights and duties. Communities with different religious orientations enjoy religious autonomy, where other faiths were able to practice their own laws and customs. This essentially was wider in scope than the modern idea of religious freedom.

The constitution of Medina established a pluralistic state - a community of communities. It promised equal security to all and all were equal in the eyes of the law.

The principles of equality, consensual governance and pluralism are beautifully enmeshed in the compact of Medina. Here the prophet ran the first Islamic state with consultation of the people. The Prophet (PBUH) not only preached the rule of law but acted accordingly.

The citizens were freely allowed to fully participate and also free to demand their rights.

The prophet was once sitting in the company of other companions, when a Bedouin arrived and rudely and aggressively demanded a loan back from the prophet,

Omar (RST) was angry at the Bedouin's behaviour and was about to strike him in anger. But the Prophet intervened immediately and told Omar (RST) that if you sympathise with me, then paying the loan off is the appropriate response.

When Omar (RST) became Leader of the state, an issue was raised of the high cost of marriage and the social consequences for the society. He tried to promote small Haq Meher (Dowry gift) within the Muslim community. An old

lady challenged him in public and told him, that he had no right to interfere in their rights to demand the Haq Meher, even if they demanded a mountain of gold.

Omar (RST) did not put her in prison or punish her in any way, but instead thanked her and thanked God that there are individuals in society who are able to correct him.

Similarly the public had absolute freedom to hold the leadership accountable for any financial or pecuniary irregularities.

Omar (RST) was questioned whilst delivering the Friday sermon in the Mosque, about the distribution of cloth and how he had managed to make a shirt out of it, while the rest could not. Omar had to get his son to give evidence that he had given his share to his father Omar and with two shares he was able to make his shirt.

Omar had to show that he had acted fairly and that he had not abused his position of authority and only thereafter he was allowed to finish the sermon. Freedom to express freely, even against the rulers was accepted and was not undermined in any way.

The concept of Tawheed (Unity of God) is the most important pillar of the Islamic religion that defines Muslims and Islam. Yet, in the early Islamic periods, Muslim accepted the differing views held by leading Muslim jurists and philosophers on this important concept. Hence, there were many different groups prevalent within the Muslim community. There was intensive debate on the principal concept of Tawheed without one of the group's condemning the other.

If these Muslims were able to accept pluralistic views in the cornerstone principle of Tawheed, how can some contemporary Muslim leaders hold the view that their interpretation of the religion is the only authentic one, and those who differ with them are bound to go to hell? Or are out of the fold of Islam.

I do believe that it is time to liberate ourselves from the artificial restrictions imposed on our minds that had primarily been put in place for political reasons.

The glory of the Islamic civilization emerged as a consequence of the enormous flow of contingent ideas from Muslim thinkers, processing the pure idea of Islam. It led to the emergence of several streams of ideas, Islamic legal thought, philosophy, moral science, spirituality, and Kalam (metaphysics). Science that included physics, geology, chemistry, astronomy, anthropology, sociology and historiography developed as the handmaiden of Islamic philosophy. Muslims invented the concept of nought in mathematics, can one imagine where the world would be without zero. I assure you almost the entire modern world would come to a stand still without zero.

These streams of contingent ideas continued to flow and enrich not only the Islamic World but also the entire human civilization, including the West. Every new stream of idea added a newer, deeper and richer dimension to the Islamic world. For nearly a thousand years it manifested the zenith of human achievements in both a worldly and a spiritual sense.

It is not only in the early period of Islam that one finds freedom and tolerance, Baghdad in Iraq, Granada in Spain, to Ottoman rule over Sarajevo in the 19th century, where Muslims, Jews, Catholics and orthodox Christians lived side by side in an atmosphere of tolerance unknown elsewhere in Europe at the time.

Despite all the evidence, there are some who have been arguing vehemently that Islam and a Democratic society are incompatible. On one hand, some scholars have tried to present Islam as an anti-democratic and inherently authoritarian ethos that precludes democratisation in the Muslims World.

By misrepresenting Islam in this way they are seeking to prove that Islam as a set of values which is indeed a barrier to the global progress of civilization.

On the other hand many Islamic activists, using simple and sometimes crude notions of secularism and sovereignty, reject democracy as a rule of Man as opposed to Islam, which is the rule of God. Those Muslims who reject democracy falsely assume that secularism and democracy are necessarily connected. Secularism is a liberal tradition not a prerequisite for democracy.

Religion does play a significant role in democratic politics. Many Western countries, even today do have a direct link between the state and the church. England still has an established church of which the Queen is the head; many Bishops sit at the House of Lords. Both Germany and Sweden for example have formal linkages between church and state. There are many Christian Socialist and Christian Democrat parties operating in European countries.

According to Professor Muqtedar Khan “These Islamists also do not make a distinction between de jure sovereignty and de facto sovereignty. For example even though God was supposedly sovereign in Afghanistan, in fact it was the Taliban who were sovereign there. Those who think that Allah was sovereign in the Taliban’s Afghanistan perhaps worshiped Mullah Omar. In order to understand the situation better one has to recognize the difference between sovereignty in principle and sovereignty in fact. Sovereignty in fact is always man’s whether in a democracy or an Islamic State. Rejecting democracy because man is sovereign is a big mistake. What we really need to worry about is how to limit the de-facto sovereignty of man”.

Democracy with its principles of limited government, public accountability, checks and balances, separation of powers and transparency in governance does succeed in limiting man’s sovereignty. The Muslim world plagued by despots, dictators and self-regarding monarchs badly needs the limitation of man’s sovereignty. We have to expose the politics behind the arguments made by those westerners who hold malice against Islam, but we also have to be at the forefront in exposing the fallacies in the assumptions of those Muslims who misunderstand democracy and Islam. The very concept of every human being a “Khalifa” of God on earth means that we are all equal, every one of us has the right to participate in public life, and who so ever is chosen

to be the leader is entitled to exercise the power on behalf of the community. To me this is what democracy basically is.

Some secular fundamentalists argue that in order to democratise, the Muslim world needs to either discard the project of Islamisation and liberalize or essentially reform Islam itself to accommodate democracy. This argument is based on one theoretical assumption that democracy and Islam are not compatible and one empirical assumption that Muslims strongly adhere to Islamic principles. But in order to argue that democracy is missing from the Islamic world because of Islam, it must be demonstrated that Muslims indeed practice Islam.

One of the primary motivations for the contemporary Islamic revival is the widespread belief, even consensus, among Muslims that their societies have strayed far away from Islam. A brief survey of adherence to the personal and public obligatory aspects of Islam such as establishment of prayer, fasting and charity, and establishment of justice, crime and corruption, free virtuous societies; will reveal that Muslim societies are not only undemocratic but also un-Islamic. So why blame Islam if un-Islamic societies are also undemocratic. Indeed there is nothing in Islam and in Muslim practices that is fundamentally opposed to democracy, justice, freedom, fairness, equality or tolerance.

The large number of Muslims who came out to vote in the United Kingdom and those Muslims who voted in the hundreds of millions in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey, Egypt and elsewhere testify to their comfort with democracy. Take for example the fact that President Bush in America only managed 29% of the vote and contrast that with Mr Khatami in Iran who had managed 86%, some wards in Britain only manage 11% turn out with some wards in Muslim countries reach almost 110%!

In the minds of these nearly 1.2 billion Muslims who practice some form of democracy there is no dispute between Islam and democracy. It is time we moved onto a more fruitful line of inquiry. If not Islam, what has precluded the democratisation of the Muslim world? Are structural failures in the Muslim society due to the legacy of colonialism? How far the debilitating corruption is

holding the Muslim world back? Can we find a way to remove these seeds of underdevelopment?

Some Western governments would also have to ask the question that if democracy is good, why do they choose to support the despot dictators in the Muslim world? Why not 'wish for others, what you wish for yourself'

Finally Ladies and Gentlemen:

Freedom of Belief is a cornerstone of democratic society. Islam has a golden principle "La Iqra fe din" there is no compulsion in faith. Every one must be able to choose their faith, this can not be forced on any individual.

The Muslim world and the West have to work together to promote freedom and human rights for every one. Wwe only have one world and one humanity. We all have to join forces to build a world which is free from tyranny, poverty, corruption, illiteracy and injustice. If we can achieve this then we can have a new world order, failing this there will only be a new world disorder.