

## **What Makes a Good Community? The Muslim Perspective**

*By Seema Ahmad*

Respected guests, I would like to begin with the beautiful Islamic greeting of peace, Assalamo-alaikum.

I am honoured to have the privilege of addressing this gathering. Although I have lived in Leicester for almost 20 years, I actually grew up here in Greenwich. In fact, my parents and two brothers still live here. I have seen many changes over the years. When we first moved to the area in the early 70's, ours was one of only a few Asian families on the street. There were no halal meat shops nearby, so my Dad used to treat us once a week to Kosher sausages from the Jewish grocery shop in Woolwich. There was no purpose built mosque for the growing Muslim community so an old building was purchased in the centre of Woolwich. Ironically, the building used to be a pub!

In 2008, apart from there being a purpose built mosque in Plumstead, there are around 1500 mosques throughout the U.K out of a total of 54000 places of worship. These include churches, mosques, gurdwaras mandirs and others. This has had a great effect on the landscape and communities of Britain. Many people of faith take into consideration the location of their nearest place of worship when moving home or entering the country. This essential infrastructure provides a point of contact with like minded people. It is a place to gather, keep in touch, seek advice, make new friends, offer and receive help. Many of these places of worship provide after school clubs, classes, free meals and activities. Without them, so many of societies young and elderly would be at a loss.

Essentially, places of worship promote and teach the values which form the basis of a strong community. I would like to share with you some of the fundamental values of Islam.

1) The absolute basic belief for a Muslim is **TAWHEED**. This can be translated as 'Oneness.' It refers to the Oneness of God but it also refers to the oneness of humanity. We have in common the fact that we were all created by the same God. This makes us all equal but not similar, it provides us with unity but not uniformity.

The Prophet Mohammad said, "The whole of creation belongs to the family of God."

2) Another basic belief for Muslims is that of **KHILAFAT**. This means 'Trusteeship.' We are trustees of the Earth and therefore have a responsibility to take care of it. In Islam, if we are responsible for something, we are also accountable for it. It is therefore our duty as Muslims to take care of other people, animals, plants and the environment.

3) The third basic belief I want to mention is **AKHIRA**. This can be translated as 'Accountability.' It means we are accountable for everything we do. Every action has a consequence. It can either earn you good deeds or bad deeds. The objective in Islam is to do as many of the things that earn you good in this life before time and life runs out. The outcome of this accumulation will determine the eternal destination. If this type of personal accountability and responsibility can be instilled in children from a young age, the need for so many CCTV cameras, vandalism, abuse and many other problems would be greatly reduced.

Islam recognises the rights of others. It teaches co-existence not isolation. Contrary to what many are led to believe, the Quran says, **'There is no compulsion in religion.'** It also says in Chapter 49 verse 13,

**"Oh! Mankind. We made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other, not so that you may despise each other. Verily, the most honoured of you in the sight of God is he who is the most righteous."**

There have been examples of co-existence where Muslims and those of other faiths have flourished. The Jews of Spain were persecuted until the arrival of Islam. Rebecca Weiner writes for the Jewish Virtual Library that,

"The era of Muslim rule in Spain from the 8<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century was considered the 'Golden Age' for Spanish Jewry. Jewish intellectual and spiritual life flourished."

HIJRAH is one of the most significant events for Muslims. It is the migration of the early Muslim community from Makkah to Medina with the view to set up the first society based on Islamic values. So important is this event that the Muslim calendar actually begins with this date so we are now in the year 1429 after Hijrah.

A society was established in Medina where the different communities lived together. When the Prophet invited people to Islam, it was a call to change and improve oneself, one's homes and society. In fact, he established a whole community based on collective effort, mutual respect and partnership. Faith provided the foundation, the motivation and the vision for that change. Faith in One God and belief that all human beings are equal in His sight. There was so much mention of the rights of others, particularly the neighbours that the early Muslims thought neighbours would also be given rights to inheritance!

These successful communities were ones where there was clearly interaction. Where there is interaction there is inevitably going to be conflict and disagreement. This is true in a marriage, amongst siblings or even in the playground. The important point is to have mechanisms in place that allow resolution of conflict. Recognition of the rights of others, compassion and forgiveness can help make coexistence possible.

A revelation came to the Prophet Muhammad saying the following, Chapter 3 Verse 92

**“By no means will you achieve righteousness unless you give freely of that which you love; and whatever you give, of truth God knows it well.”**

Faith had entered the hearts of the early Muslims in such a way that they competed in doing good. If we just imagine for a moment, a community that competes in wanting to do good, I'm sure you will agree that would be the sort of community we would all want to live in.

When this revelation came, the wealthy took the opportunity to give away their wealth and whatever else they could in the hope of attaining righteousness. The poor felt hard done by as they were not in a position to give charity. They felt they were at an unfair disadvantage. This is when the Prophet explained the concept of charity in Islam. The reason why I am mentioning this is because it

describes some of the things that make a good community according to Islam.

He said,

**“Every good act is a charity. To smile at your brother is charity, to show people the right direction is charity, assisting the blind is charity, doing justice between two people is charity, lifting someone’s load is charity, pure comforting words are charity and removing an obstacle of inconvenience from the road is charity.”**

He made it clear that you do not need to be wealthy to be able to give charity. Every day acts of kindness towards others can earn God’s pleasure. In fact, some of the things are so simple but they have been worthy of mention. Imagine something as easy to do as smile! When you do it, it spreads good feeling and uplifts those around you. This has a positive effect on others and according to Islam is rewarded by none other than God Himself!

The fundamental needs of people can be summed up into ‘HE HE.’ That is, Housing, Education, Health and Employment. ‘HE HE’ may sound like laughter, but it has been proven that it is not enough to keep a community happy. Other things that are essential for a community to flourish are protection of life and property and living without fear. All good communities need laws that take into consideration basic human rights.

The 2001 Household Census shows that almost 84% of the population of Britain declare themselves to be following a particular faith. They therefore consider faith to be a part of their identity . Serious problems can arise when individuals or sections of the community feel disadvantaged, demonised or marginalised for any part of their personal identity. A community is wholesome and strong only when every individual and every section of it, no matter how diverse, feel accepted and valued, and is able to participate and contribute towards its betterment.

The challenge for us all is not only to accept the diversity within our community but to celebrate it with a sincere effort to understand each other.