

ARCHES

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The Challenge of Dialogue



Over the past few months, a number of events at home and abroad have contributed either positively or negatively towards the challenge of creating a platform where proper and constructive dialogue can take place.

On a positive level, Islam Expo and Expolslamia both took place this summer, pushing forward new perspectives of Islam and the life of Muslims, which had not been sufficiently highlighted in the past. Both events which took place in London (Alexandra Palace) and Manchester (Manchester Evening News Arena) respectively, provided ample evidence that in the ideals of Islam; the scriptures of the Holy Qur'an as well as the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, are instructions to avert whatever would lead to clash, to bloodshed, to destruction and to division amongst human beings, all human beings. The conferences which accompanied these substantial events also stressed those ideals and principles even further, through dozens of lectures, seminars and workshops.

At Islam Expo for instance, more than 80 speakers from more than 22 countries and from an array of religious, ideological, academic, professional and social backgrounds discussed issues of concern over the magnificent four-day event which the Mayor of London opened on the 6th of July and The Cordoba Foundation was proudly one of the main sponsors. The spectacle of a panel made of a Muslim, a Christian, a Jew and an atheist, discussing, negotiating and even disagreeing in a civil manner on topics of paramount concern to all, was one to cherish. The two-minute silence commemorating the first anniversary of the London Bombings just before the Friday prayers on the 2nd day of Islam Expo, was further sign of where British Muslims stand on such acts of brutality, murder and destruction, not only because of their humane streak, but because their faith and their religion instruct them to do so.

While those, amongst many other incidents, brought great hope that we could move forward at a greater pace in building solid bridges, were somewhat dashed by the heightened security alert which swept the UK on the 10th of August, and which resulted in widespread disruption to a number of facilities, not least airports where millions of travellers were either arriving into or departing from the country. The subsequent wave of detentions and arrests, as well as the rhetoric and discourse that came from a variety of corners; political, security and the media, brought us back to where we were, if not even further back.

The surveys and opinion polls that came out in the wake of the news of an alleged terror plot all painted a grim and gloomy picture. What is clear is that more and more people on all sides and from all sectors of our society, display greater and greater levels of anxiety, apprehension and mistrust in one another than ever before, and that is cause for considerable concern. Unless greater and more concerted effort is exerted by all those concerned with securing a safe and prosperous future for all, the outcome will be no less than tragic with society dividing into fearful, apprehensive and xenophobic constituencies.

The onus must fall upon those who represent and who lead the communities that make the shape and essence of Britain. The Muslim community, through its various representing bodies, organisations and prominent religions and social leaders, must show commitment to their faith, ideals and principles and continue to ►

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educate, instruct and guide the young on proper methods of reaction to anxiety, frustration and fear. There must continue to be no tolerance of those that preach what Islam rejects, and who exploit the anxieties of the young for their own false and polluted ideologies and ends.

The past few years have proven extremely positive with Muslims turning to greater levels of integration and participation with all sectors of life, including politics, the media, social work and more. This successful drive, offered proof that inducing change through positive and constructive means is the correct channel to pursue, and hence pull the carpet from under the feet of the extremists. Such initiatives and campaigns must be driven further, promoted and encouraged further on all levels and through all possible means.

Meanwhile and simultaneously, authorities, whether political, security, religious, social and academic, must also display the same level of commitment to finding an end to the current crisis through calm and collected measures and in consultation with all corners of society. To think that it would be possible to swipe away extremism and fanaticism with tough measures and heavy-handed policies would be to ignore the lessons of the past, both distant and

recent. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are proof that issues cannot be dealt with through dropping bombs and missiles or by occupying and taking over other countries. If anything, all surveys, polls and studies have actually concurred, almost unanimously, that sympathy towards extremists if not extremism itself, has risen since September 2001, often drastically. This indicates a deep-rooted fault with the policies employed in this regard, and the urgent need for a radical revision of those policies.

Also, and as outlined above, the drive of British Muslims towards promoting the integration and further participation of young Muslims in all corners of British life, is facing the threat of being undermined by such policies at home and abroad, as it disproves their claim that change could be had through constructive rather than violent means. According to a Muslim community leader who spoke recently on the BBC: 'whenever we approach the young with the suggestion that they could contribute towards making Britain a better country for its people and the rest of the world, they tell us about recent police raids at dawn, about Forrest Gate, about Charles De Menezes and about the anti-terror laws. They also point to Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon. They've lost confidence in the government,

in the police and they've even lost confidence in us!'

The recent letter to the Prime Minister signed by leading Muslim figures and organisations is a point in case. The letter, besides its clear message of appeal for a major rethink of home and foreign policies, also reflect a growing anxiety amongst those leaders that they face the challenge of losing the attention and even respect of the young, hence lose the means of making an impression and an impact on them to becoming positive rather than negative elements within society. The reaction and response of the government was disappointing to say the very least and possibly - God forbid - of dangerous consequences for all.

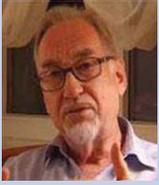
The challenge of confronting extremism, whether the kind found in the rhetoric of some Muslims who preach hatred and the eradication of the other, or whether in some of the writings published by Western columnists, who also preach the same ideas but through an opposite angle, is one that we as Britons, Europeans, and people of the earth, must do collectively and with conviction. Otherwise the emerging possible scenarios are too dreadful to merely contemplate.

Anas Altikriti Chief Executive,
The Cordoba Foundation

The Cordoba Foundation launch 7 July 2006 Alexandra Palace



Dissecting our troubled world



Dr. Murad Wilfried Hofmann is a prominent Muslim German expert on Islam and author of several books, including *Journey to Makkah* and *Islam: The Alternative*. Many of his books and essays focus on Islam's place in the West.

Dr. Hofmann was born a Catholic, but converted to Islam in 1980, while serving in the German Foreign Service as a specialist on issues concerning nuclear defense. He graduated from Union College in New York and completed his legal studies at Munich University where he received a doctorate in jurisprudence in 1957. He became a research assistant for the reform of federal civil procedure, and in 1960 received an LL.M. degree from Harvard Law School. He was Director of Information for NATO in Brussels from 1983 to 1987.

Dr Murad went on to serve as the Director of Information for NATO in Brussels from 1983-1987; Ambassador to Algeria from 1987 to 1990; and Ambassador to Morocco from 1990 to 1994. He was also posted as Attaché in the German Consulate General in Algiers where he found himself, up to 1962, in the middle of the bloody guerilla conflict between France and the Algerian National Front.

Arches' Abdullah Faliq interviews Dr Murad Hofmann on current efforts towards dialogue in Britain (and Europe) and explores his take on issues troubling our world.

AF: Dr Murad, you have indeed an illustrious life experience and education. Looking back at everything, how has the world changed now in terms of seeking a rapprochement between the East and the West?

MWH: When I became a Muslim 26 years ago, Islam in Europe was still considered a folkloristic thing, adding some exotic color, couscous and döner kebab to downtown city life. No body then conceived Islam as a danger. In fact, most Muslims in Europe as so-called guest-workers

still intended to return "home" after having earned enough in hard currency.

This picture dramatically changed when millions of Muslim guest workers decided to stay after all, and their children demanded equal treatment, e.g. the right to build mosques, receive Islamic religious instruction in school, slaughter in halal fashion, and be buried Islamically. This new Muslim assertiveness created irrational fears of Muslim domination, mobilizing collective European memories of

Christian-Muslim confrontation way back. This fear turned into sheer anxiety when in the bloody process of decolonization Muslims were forced to fight - the French in Algeria, the Pakistanis in Kashmir, the Russians in Chechnya, and - most consequentially - Zionist occupants in Palestine. As a result, in European eyes Islam became associated with violence.

This process received further negative impulses when a number of Muslims resorted to terrorist methods and suicidal attacks. In



sum, regardless of the background of 9/11, the Western approach to Islam has become totally warped to the point of becoming hysterical. Under these circumstances rational dialogue is almost impossible. On the contrary, more Western people than ever now believe that Samuel Huntington had correctly forecast the future of the Islamic East and the secular West as essentially confrontational.

AF: How can this situation improve?

MWH: This situation can only improve through a prolonged peaceful passage of time. As it is, every armed incident involving Muslims throws us back to point zero. I am not pessimistic by nature but as a realist I cannot be but pessimistic as far as future European-Muslim and American-Muslim relations are concerned.

Basics

AF: How would you define yourself: a Muslim in Europe, or a European Muslim?

MWH: For a Muslim his faith is the most important thing in life. Therefore all Muslims form that unique community, called ummah, which so admirably comes to life during Hajj [annual pilgrimage to Makka]. This being said, it is also true that one's cultural background, including one's language (as a Wittgensteinian window on to the world) impinges on our personalities. Thus we can easily distinguish - not only on ethnical grounds - an Indonesian or Indian Muslim from a Maghribian or Bosnian one. Islam considers this variety as a treasure.

The parallel existence of schools of jurisprudence (madhab) illustrates this. Therefore there is good ground for also considering oneself, as in my case, a "European Muslim" and to expect that there even will develop a fifth, American-European madhab.

AF: Ok, let' us get some clarity on

basic definitions. Define for us, if you will, the concept of "dialogue among civilizations", or even the notion of "civilization", particularly in contrast to "culture".

MWH: "Civilization" for me stands for the entire technical apparatus of a people, its economic, technological, scientific, and material make up ("standard of life"). "Culture", in turn, for me means the entire body of beliefs and rituals ("religion"), philosophical assumptions, everyday traditions (including la cuisine) and aesthetic endeavors of a people. Thus, even the most "primitive" tribe has culture, regardless of its technological progress.

Of course, neither cultures nor civilizations can dialogue with each other; only people can.

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AF: So, what does it mean for a civilization to "dialogue" then?

MWH: Civilisations and cultures can "dialogue" by interacting with each other when they meet or overlap as they did in Muslim Andalusia, during the Crusades, the Mongol onslaught, and Colonization. Today, this interaction is called globalization. Like all interaction globalization also is not a one-way-street. You can verify that by looking at Muslim INTERNET inputs.

AF: In your opinion, what are the conditions or limits of dialogue and what are the obstacles in this endeavor?

MWH: Dialogue presupposes an exchange between equals and must not primarily serve missionary

purposes. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe put this best in No. 121 of his *Maxims and Reflections* where he wrote: "Tolerance really should be a transitional attitude only; it must lead to acceptance. Merely to put up with someone amounts to insult". Indeed, in a hierarchical relationship dialogue is impossible.

AF: What are the Islamic theological foundations of dialogue among civilizations and religious tolerance?

MWH: There are several theological bases for religious pluralism in both the Qur'an and the Sunnah [Prophetic Traditions]. Suffice it here to refer to Surat al-Ma'ida: 48 - a marvelous manifesto of religious tolerance and a slap into the face of those who still act as if "extra ecclesiam nulla salus". If with Islam you have a 24 carat golden bracelet, you do not have to deny that others also own golden bracelets. The same tolerance to be shown by Muslims in inter-religious dialogue is suggested. e.g., in verses like 2: 256, 29: 18 and 109: 6.

AF: Some people, especially the clerics, do not like the term "religious tolerance". What's your take on this?

MWH: I, too, don't like that term, as explained before. But in international law this is a standard term, bound to remain. We should treat tolerance as a minimum, and not as an end in itself.

AF: Are there efforts internationally to replace the term with something better? As a litterateur, have you any alternative suggestions?

MWH: A better term might be "respect / acceptance of religious diversity".

AF: What about multiculturalism - how relevant is this today? It seems the burden is on the minorities alone who are required to play by the rules of integration.

MWH: In a globalizing world, most

of us - whether we admit it or not - live a multicultural life. Without thinking about it we now eat food from around the world, like avocados. We listen to music from around the globe. When traveling as tourists we adapt to foreign manners. If you come to think of it: Haven't you lived multi-culturally, even in your own country, all along?

The issue with the concept of multiculturalism now is that it causes fear among people who do not want to lose their cultural roots and confuse a multiculturalism with moral and cognitive relativism. Things have gotten worse when the discussion quite naturally produced the concept of a "lead culture" (Leitkultur in German). The concepts wrongly seem to suggest that local culture is superior and that it is immutable.

AF: And what about freedom of expression - how should this be pursued in the current political climate in Britain and Europe?

MWH: Freedom of expression is a fundamental value in the Occidental tradition (and law) as well as in the Shari'a. In other words, ever since the Age of Enlightenment, the development of the rule of law in Europe and North America, and the definition of "human rights" in and by the West, freedom of expression has become quasi sacrosanct there.

Until recently it was also agreed that the freedom of expression, like all rights and privileges, has its limits. Thus we still have an anti-blasphemy article in the German penal code (§ 166 StGB). Alas, the Christian world is no longer willing to defend even its own values against blasphemy. Of course, if you do not believe anymore in God or the Prophets, "blaspheming" them is sheer nonsense for you.

AF: What lessons have been learned from the recent controversy of the satirical cartoons (in Denmark) of the Prophet Muhammad -- which remains fresh in people's minds?

MWH: The caricature incident

proved to which shocking degree the Western world has become agnostic. This lesson we should have learned before.

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Practical dialogue

AF: Let's talk about practicalities now: traditional modalities of dialogue between cultures, developed over the past decade, largely failed because of their almost exclusive focus on what cultures and religions have in common; not differences and diversity?

MWH: The dialogue, in practical terms, has failed for two major reasons: (1) It has indeed frequently been what German bishops called a Kuscheldialog, i.e. a cozy, snuggling dialogue. (2) Furthermore, the Christian-Muslim dialogue all too often got stuck in a confrontation of irreconcilable dogmatic, theological positions, e.g. whether Jesus was divine or not; whether there is a trinity or not; whether Jesus died on the cross or not. Such a dialogue leads nowhere. We know that our religious convictions differ.

Rather, the partners-in-dialogue should have focused on common social problems, e.g. how to bring up children religiously in a totally materialistic, value free, pornographic media world; how jointly to defend the rights of religious minorities.

AF: Are you optimistic that dialogue between civilizations will achieve what is expected of it, or will a clash of civilisations be the norm and prevail in the future?

MWH: Samuel Huntington was

wrong in assuming that civilizations could clash. What can, and does, clash is States and individual people. Thus the tragic, revolting situation in the Near East exists, (a) because the United States put its entire weight, money, and weaponry unconditionally behind Israel. This in turn is the result (b) of both the Jewish lobby and the large and aggressive Evangelist and Neo-Conservative Christian Right in the United States. I am afraid that this situation will not change drastically even after the current, disastrous Bush administration. That Lieberman's candidacy for another Senate term was defeated does not imply a sea-change in US domestic policies.

AF: Let's now turn to dialogue between Islam and other faiths. Some Westerners would question the value of dialogue with Islam because, for example, they view the Shari'a as incompatible with Western ideals and values. Can the two be reconciled?

MWH: Your question starts from the usual assumption that the Shari'a was identical with penal law. It would indeed be worthwhile to acquaint Western people better with what the Shari'a stands for, as a comprehensive system of rules governing all aspects of life. It would already be a success if Islamic law (fiqh) would be counted as one of the great legal systems of the world, alongside Roman Law, Anglo-American Law, and Continental Law.

AF: Do you think the Crusades actually affected the way Americans perceived the Islamic world? Can you take the American perception that far back?

MWH: The Crusades left very little impact on either side's public memory. The Islamic world was much more adversely impressed by the Colonization, and the Western world by Osama bin Laden than by anything preceding these events. In particular, American historical memory is very short and extremely parochial.

AF: Should Christians and Muslims strive for religious ecumenism. What does ecumenism look like from a Muslim perspective?

MWH: My view on ecumenism coincides with the Catholic view: By embracing everybody on the basis of the lowest common denominator ("Peace") one gains little but risks losing one's identity. Should we blur the lines which divide Muslims from Pakistani Qadianis, Turkish Alevites, Lebanese Druses or Iranian Baha'i? In the last movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's 9th Symphony Friedrich Schiller makes the choir sing: "Be embrace, millions!" This is as naïve as the conferences of the World Ecumenical Council where intellectuals and esoteric leaders assure each other of meaning well. On the ground, this means as little as Hans Küng's "world ethos".

AF: In Britain and Europe, Christians seem to be more engaged in Islamic-Christian dialogue ventures than Muslims. Why do you think this is? Are Christians more open to dialogue than Muslims?

MWH: The picture has already changed, particularly in Germany, where Protestant church leaders have become skeptical of the value of dialoguing. Muslims are reticent, in as much as they are, because they are regularly seen as petitioners, people who have little to give and demand a lot. This attitude could be reversed if more Muslims recognized how much Islam could contribute to saving the West from moral collapse. In that case, the Muslims would become more assertive, and that would immediately change the dialogue situation qualitatively.

Dialogue and the role of Muslims

AF: Let's now focus a little on the role of Muslims vis-à-vis dialogue. These days we seem to be talking a lot about dialogue, but is a real exchange between Muslims and non-Muslims as important to you

as that is within the Muslim community?

MWH: It is probably inevitable that most offers to explain Islam, made by Muslims to non-Muslims, are mainly taken up by Muslims. I myself, lecturing all over the world, find myself mainly preaching to the converted. Non-Muslims stay away. The same is of course true of Muslim INTERNET sites, even though the address of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany (www.islam.de) frequently is visited by non-Muslims.

AF: How important is the role of Imams and Muslim activists as bridge-builders between Muslims and other faiths? Could they do more?

MWH: The role of Imams and activists is potentially enormous; the question is whether they are qualified. Effective da'wa can only be conducted by someone who is thoroughly familiar with a local culture. One has to know the historical hang-ups as well as all the knowledge (and prejudices) filled in school into the heads of the local population. In addition, the success of a Muslim activist (da'i) crucially depends on his command of the local language.

Otherwise, most missionary efforts are wasted. To give two examples:

First, if one distributes Islamic literature from India it will probably not be read at all for the simply reason of being printed, with many spelling mistakes, on bad paper.

Second, when presenting the Qur'an as "the word of God" I will only earn contemptuous smiles from all those who had learned in school that Immanuel Kant has proven once and for all that there is no rational proof for the existence of God. In other words, da'wa must be conducted by public relations and media specialists, and cannot only be conducted by Imams imported from Kerala, Rawalpindi or Kenya.

AF: But these Imams and activists will not disappear and their influence will continue to be

significant?

MWH: Such imams will of course continue to arrive. However, their command of the local languages will increasingly be made compulsory by governments. In fact, visa may no longer be issued to imams unless they have made an effort, even before coming, to acquaint themselves with the culture and language of their future host country.

AF: In your opinion, what are the two most important issues for European Muslims today that need to be resolved?

MWH: Most importantly, European Muslims must get their act together. This presupposes that they learn to communicate in one single language understood by all. It also presupposes that they adopt a Salafi approach rather than clinging to their Hanafi, Maliki, or Shafi'i madhhab. The creation of a European Muslim Union (EMU) recently in Istanbul may be a beginning in the right direction.

AF: A salafi approach? Please elaborate.

MWH: To be sure, the "Salafi" approach as developed a century ago by Muhammad Abdun in Cairo calls for a return to the two sources of Islamic jurisprudence, Qur'an and Prophetic Sunna - and nothing else. (This approach must not be confused with the Hanbali still school-centered reform movement of Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wah-hab in today's Saudi Arabia which, too, claims to be "Salafi").

AF: In the last century, Europeans witnessed the most bloodiest of wars of modern times in which they fought each other. They eventually put aside their enmities and formed an EU. In your opinion, what prevents Europeans today to overcome their historical hang-ups about Muslims?

MWH: The Europeans amazingly fast and thorough chucked Communism into the so-called dustbin of history. But the dominance of Marxism /

Bolshevism / Stalinism had been with us for less than a century, and basically Communism was a European product and aberration. It was a perversion of Hegel, Prudhomme and Rousseau.

In contrast, the European confrontation with Islam has been with us now for almost 1400 years. That sticks and is emotionally grounded. As long as one cannot put entire nations on Sigmund Freud's couch there is no hope that the Europeans will overcome their anti-Islamic hang-ups within a relevant time frame.

AF: Hizbullah's leader and shaykh, Hasan Nasrullah's claimed "a historic and strategic triumph" over Israel for the Lebanese National Resistance. How do you foresee its impact on Middles East politics in the medium term i.e. next 3-5 years?

MWH: It is only slowly dawning on the rest of the world that Hizbullah has achieved both a military and political victory over Israel (which had to revise its war aims four times during the conflict). This will stiffen Muslim resistance in the area, redefine Lebanon, strengthen the Jewish anti-Zionist forces inside and outside Israel, and protect Iran from an early US attack. Not bad for a little shaykh.

AF: Finally, how do you see the emergence of China and India as world economic powers, after their absence from the world scene for over 200 years, redressing the Euro-American hegemony of global affairs?

MWH: India has yet to come to terms with its poverty, communal strife, and conflict with Pakistan. In contrast, China is set to sail into a future making it the second world power, thanks not only to the number of its people but their diligence and cohesion. This will end the unnatural one superpower era. The possible implications of that are so staggering that it is wise to refrain from speculating on them.

AF: Thank you.

Hearts as well as minds...

One of the things that I find inspiring about The Cordoba Foundation (and this is common to Toc H, the charity I work for) is that it looks back to the past in order to inform and shape our ideas in the present so that we can build a better future.

My son is a mega fan of Dr Who. In a 1980's programme Dr Who's assistant, Sarah Jane, says something to the effect of 'It is not a case that we can't do anything to make things better, it is just a case of discovering what it is that we can do.'

I think we can all safely agree that we would like to see a more peaceful world. The Cordoba Foundation continues to provide a forum for constructive dialogue, as well as news about other organisations pulling in the same direction. This is, of course, a reflection of the model provided by Cordoba itself, all those centuries ago. First of all, the intellectual debate, then the creative process spinning out from this - and with it the establishment of an inclusive and cohesive European culture.

We all know nowadays that the exchange of scientific ideas is so important for sparking new scientific ideas. Connectivity, therefore, stimulates growth - witness the gist of all the software advertising on the TV!

In the first edition of Arches, Dr Anthony McRoy identified that encounters aiming at improving relations between communities at a social level was a rather underused form of dialogue.

Konrad Pedziwiatr in the second edition said 'The character of Islam in Europe of the twenty-first century will depend above all on the intellectual endeavour of individual Muslims and non-Muslims aiming at getting to know each other and accepting each other's differences.'



Without giving offence, I would just like to tweak that by putting my thumb over the word 'intellectual'. Pedziwiatr is obviously intellectual but unfortunately I am not! Nevertheless I am sure that ordinary people would really like to be part of this creative process - and perhaps it is important that everyone takes on that opportunity and responsibility.

Connectivity can take lots of different forms. As an accountant I have seen the importance of networking with new contacts, of internal communications and of maintaining a 'connectedness' with clients. I was a churchwarden for a couple of years and I learned that hosting a fun event gave people small jobs to do which generates inter-activeness. Having been a teacher for a couple of years when my children were young, I'm sure that any student will agree that learning is enhanced by rapport.

So before we go back to Dr Who's assistant, let's check what it is that we want to achieve. For Toc H, this is breaking down barriers in society - and these can be social, generational, economic, as well as cultural or faith divides.

As a charity, Toc H was forged in the mud and blood of Flanders during the First World War. Out of the loss of conflict it was set up as a living memorial to work for a more peaceful world by breaking down the barriers that cause conflict. It started in a house that was set ▶

up by a clergyman as a haven for soldiers close to the trenches in Belgium. The success of Talbot House rested on its friendship and simple hospitality - small influences shedding light during the darkest of days. We can use this as a model to shape our actions today.

What does The Cordoba Foundation want? In issue 2 of Arches, Anas Altikriti spoke of 'universal notions of peace, positive interaction and constructive co-existence'. Sounds good to me.

So now that we know what we want, we need to 'discover what it is we can do'. Let's be realistic. Most of us lead very busy lives and free time is at a premium... there is a limit to the amount of energy that the average person in the street can devote to solving the problems of the world.

But for the thinking person doing nothing is surely not an option, either. Given the notion of a global village, in the words of Konrad Pedziwiatr, 'there are no longer local conflicts'. Doing nothing implies acquiescence or acceptance or lack of caring.

So what is the smallest thing that ordinary people can do to make a statement about working for a more peaceful world? We can at least extend the hand of friendship to our neighbours across a cultural or faith 'divide'. This action both shows belief in working for a better world and in itself builds that better world. Consequently we are running our Toc H 'Tea and Cake' campaign from 11 September to 11 November - dates that resonant with conflict and the bringing to an end of conflict. We hope to build up the campaign over the next few years.

What makes me think that this approach works? Someone from a Muslim organisation working in partnership with Toc H said to me 'this notion is nothing that we have created - friendship, hospitality, neighbourliness...these are eternal truths'. I am sure that you too will agree. So therefore, as people of faith, we know in our hearts that this approach works.

It is merely that our modern-day communication networks can work for the good and enable us to organise ourselves - making these small gestures more influential. The video clip on our website (<http://www.tochparticipation.co.uk/be-inspired.htm>), with its pertinent comments from our local Muslim neighbours, was seen by 3.7m people on BBC 'Songs of Praise' last Remembrance Sunday.

Why do we need such a simple approach? Partly it is that our lives are so busy and our society so frenetic that we do not often stop and make conversation with a new face in the neighbourhood - in fact there are those that might feel that it is not quite proper so to do. Therefore let's create a catalyst for these simple encounters to take place.

One of the overwhelming impressions that I have had meeting people from different faiths and backgrounds is how charming and friendly they are - as any visitor to Islam Expo would have found. In an age where there are periodic calls for changes as to how people portray their identity, just meeting people raises the question 'why would you want to change anyone so charming and sincere?' This all sounds terribly naïve, but it is about people exploring their common humanity and responding from the heart.

They say that job interviewers form their opinion of the candidate within 30 seconds - so even by sharing simple hospitality we are learning about the other person on a human level. Whether we realise it or not, we will come away with a greater intrinsic appreciation of the other person that will in some measure shape our views in the future.

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On the other hand, the intellectual debate continues. This initiative works alongside broader debate, and cannot expect to emulate it. Nevertheless, there have been plenty of cups of tea shared by influential people in the past, and in many ways we see the benefits of this in the existing dialogue between leading figures in this country.

It remains important that ordinary people feel that they, too, can be influential in some small measure. Issue 2 of Arches quoted Carly Fiorina, CEO of Hewlett-Packard who, on 26 September 2001 said: 'More than ever, we must focus on the importance of leadership - bold acts of leadership and decidedly personal acts of leadership.'

Extending the hand of friendship to a neighbour across a cultural or faith divide is a personal act of leadership - like the Muslim teenage girl who wants to hold a Toc H 'Tea and Cake' street party in her cul-de-sac, or the Jewish lady who is going to get some families and schools involved, or the email that popped up this week saying 'we heard about this campaign and we've organised our event' or the chaplain who said 'at our youth hospitality event we won't serve tea and we won't serve cake but count us in as part of this campaign'

It's easy to make a small difference... and it's an enriching experience too - even with a healthy option!

Madeleine Fone Toc H 'Tea and Cake'

Local Dialogue and British Muslims: some reflections

The Cordoba Foundation (TCF) is a much needed endeavour which deserves the support of people all over Britain, Europe and beyond to engage cultures in dialogue. The fact that distinguished personalities and academics spoke and participated at the launch of TCF on 7th July 2006, is proof that it is serious about dialogue from the outset. In this brief paper, I would like to contribute to the promotion of dialogue by stressing on the need for more localised dialogue to complement broader initiatives such as that of TCF. The paper seeks to inform and illustrate how local Muslims, in particular, can be effective in their towns and take active part in furthering the aims of TCF.

It is imperative that The Cordoba Foundation receives support from cities and towns across the breadth and width of Britain, because local dialogue is the pillar which can really help the TCF achieve its laudable aims.

Muslims at local level need to enter into dialogue with their local councils more and the Association of Voluntary and Community Organisations (AVCO). The key is to demonstrate that we are interested in the welfare of our communities at large. The first step is to be committed to advancing our towns, cities and villages because we are all members of the wider society. Being Muslims does not imply we live in ghettos. As part of the human race, we belong to the towns and cities where we live, work and bring up our children who are citizens of this country.

In meetings with other communities or voluntary organisations, when I am introduced as secretary of a Mosque, I try to make it a point that I represent and work for the good and welfare of Eastbourne and all its communities – 'I am here because I

want Eastbourne to win'. Similarly, a point for all our Mosques and Islamic centres to bear in mind is that our Mosques and Centres need to occupy a central place in the wider community, rather than just being a place of worship for an exclusive community. This subtle shift promotes a broader perception of the Mosque and what goes on there.

It is important that Muslims not just portray themselves as victims but become active and insightful members of the wider society

It is imperative that Muslims get involved in becoming part of the Independent Advisory Group (IAG) to the Police and other such bodies in their localities. Through my membership of the IAG, I am able to demystify what a Muslim believes in and feed this into an organisation shown to be practicing institutional racism while trying to understand policing policies and practices. The government works hard in promoting an inclusive society and has encouraged local councils to work proactively with diverse communities. In Eastbourne, this has been taken up seriously and we are members of various committees engaged in developing community networks, social, racial and religious dialogue - to embrace and celebrate cultural diversity.

It is important that Muslims not just portray themselves as victims but become active and insightful members of the wider society. We have energy, vision and capacity to live in harmony and contribute to our towns, cities and villages. Muslims should come forward with

their resource, skills, knowledge and values - demonstrating positively that we too have a lot to offer the community. We should also appreciate the benefits and advantages of living in a pluralist and democratic society like Britain where tolerance is exercised; unlike some of our Muslim societies.

What are the ingredients of a meaningful existence? I feel that life becomes more meaningful if we have (1) the capacity to build alliance regardless of where we are, and this means developing not only understanding and dialogue but sharing the richness of our culture with others, developing interdependence for safety, fulfilling and actualising ultimate goals; (2) the ability to preserve our dignity and the that of others, respecting other cultures and accepting the right of other cultures to have a dignified existence; (3) and the ability to care for other cultures and facilitate people to enjoy their own culture within a safe environment.

We can achieve these aims and aspirations not only by engaging in dialogue but also by doing 'things' together and participating in meetings, celebrations and stand up against adversities together with people of varied cultures. This, we do by responding to invitations from different faith and ethnic organisations; also by being members of SACRE.

"Cultures in dialogue" is a powerful slogan and it is right that The Cordoba Foundation is providing another forum for sharing and furthering research in cultural living. I hope it will take this initiative round the country and encourage local participation. Local participation will provide the substantive evidence for its success.

Dr Taleb Durgahee, Secretary,
Eastbourne Islamic Cultural Centre

Community Cohesion through Faith-Based Regeneration

One way of addressing the issue of building community cohesion through faith-based regeneration is to expand on the two key components: 'Community Cohesion' and 'Faith-Based Regeneration'. The latter itself requires additional analysis in terms of what each word means and how the collective phrase fits together. Here is an attempt to do just that.



The role of faith communities in regeneration

Faith based community development has been going on in Britain for centuries, though it may not have been referred to by name. In recent years we have seen the emergence of the faith based regeneration sector as a distinct component of the voluntary and community sector. There are a number of distinctive features which highlight this sector. These are (1) value base emanating from the respective spiritual and religious traditions, (2) priority for the poor and disadvantaged, (3) long term roots in communities that have experienced deprivation (in many instances), (4) involvement most marginalised groups in our society, (5) credible, grass roots community leaders who are rooted in their particular localities, and (6) cultural sensitivity to the needs of the local diverse communities.

This is not only true for the inner cities but also increasingly in the outer suburbs too. The faith communities are in for the long haul, they have long-term, sustainable commitment to and presence in the communities

The Importance of Faith and Ethnicity

When considering faith, it is important to understand that it is often an important factor in the construction of identity and belonging. Regular meetings within a faith provide many individuals with a

sense of solidarity and empowerment which can be effectively utilised in pursuit of community development.

Belonging to a faith tradition can provide vital personal support networks, which may sometimes meet very real emotional, social or economic needs. At a broader level, faith organisations can provide a platform for taking part in community development. Faith is increasingly seen as a unifying factor and a dominant feature behind community action in many minority communities. Therefore, we need to look anew at the role and function of many places of worship. Increasingly, many such institutions are providing a wide range of valuable services to their communities

Making the link

What has been missing in the past is the recognition or acknowledgement of the link between what faith communities do for their members and the contribution this makes to the regeneration of the wider community. This in turn makes a significant impact to community cohesion. A good if not an apex example of how a number of different faiths working together, liaising with key government departments and other voluntary and community sector organisations in this regard is the The Faith Based Regeneration Network UK (FbRN UK).¹

The principle aim of FbRN UK is to help in creating conditions that enhance the work of faith organisations

in the field of regeneration and community development. It aims to do this by, enabling practitioners to learn and gain inspiration from each other and share good practice, and by providing an interface between policy makers and community levels.

The process of reaching consensus on the definition of terms such as 'regeneration' and 'community cohesion' among the faiths has to start from understanding the different perspectives each is starting from, in the case of the nine faith traditions associated with FbRN UK a brief synopsis of these core positions is as below.

Regeneration and the nine faith traditions of FBRN UK

The Sikh Faith

The Sikh faith places great importance on the value of a vibrant and cohesive community. Sikh teachings encourage community involvement and daily prayers end with a call for the betterment of all of humanity. The centre of Sikh community activity and worship is the Gurdwara, which acts as a community resource open to all other faiths. Activities include: advice on specialist issues from dedicated volunteers, childcare facilities, youth clubs, language, IT training and day-care for the elderly. Additional examples range from setting up charitable institutions to providing food and shelter to the needy. Sikhs can play a significant role in community regeneration in partnership with others.

The Hindu Religion

The act of regeneration is very symbolic of reincarnation, from one life to another we try to increase the level of our spirituality so that we become close as to God as God is as close to us. Regeneration is the works we do to improve our lives here in England and in doing this improve the lives of others (friends, neighbours and strangers) around us. For the Hindu community this is a very important part of life, regeneration that gives hope to people, creates opportunity for social, cultural activity. Regeneration that brings people together to celebrate is equally as important as regeneration work to create employment and improve the physical environment around us.

Baha'i Faith

The Bah'i community is rooted in the teachings of Bah'i'ulah, the prophet-founder of their Baha'i Faith, with values of unity in diversity and justice at their core. Baha'is in Britain and across the world run a range of social and economic development projects with a focus on the transformation and regeneration of individuals, families and communities as part of a process of building a global society based on co-operation, reciprocity and genuine concern for others. Key themes in these projects are spiritual and moral education, the advancement of women, and reasonable prosperity for all.

Christianity

Two central themes in the Christian faith are the incarnation of God in human life, and the necessity of identifying with those who are poor or powerless. Christians therefore believe that the whole of creation is the arena for our relationship with God, building community is essential, and within this they are called to strive for justice and wholeness for all. This leads them to work towards a vision of the world in which all can develop their true potential and take a full part in society. Christians are called to be partners in the renewal and regeneration of civil society.

Jainism

Jainism is an Indian faith followed by several millions of people in India and by sizeable numbers of migrant Jains in Europe; over 25,000 live in Britain. Jains aspire to be 'spiritual victors' by self-effort and revere twenty four past 'enlightened ones', known as tirthankaras, whose examples guide them to the path of spiritual liberation. The twenty-fourth tirthankara Mahavira (599 to 527 BCE) simplified the Jain teachings and established the fourfold order of Jain society (monks, nuns, laymen and laywomen), the basis of Jain way of life for over 2,500 years. Jain way of life is regulated by non-violence and reverence for all life in action and relative pluralism in thoughts. Jains are vegetarians and are involved in extensive philanthropic activities, including the learning, the care of nature, care of the environment, and promotion of peace. Jains are active supporters of the FBRN.

The Jewish Faith

Justice, justice shall you pursue" says the Bible (Deuteronomy 16:20) and one of the most important commandments the Jew observes is assistance to the poor, the oppressed and the excluded. We believe that the best way of helping someone is to enable them to become independent through their own actions, and that support of non-Jews is equally as important as helping Jews. Synagogues and Jewish communal organisations support local homelessness projects and hostels, employment, counselling, have set up recycling projects, support isolated elderly people and have recently been developing Sure Start projects. The Jewish Council for Racial Equality has worked closely with refugees and in the field of community cohesion, the annual Jewish-Muslim youth football programme organised by the Maimonides Foundation and Arsenal FC is a beacon of community harmony.

The Zoroastrian Faith

Zarathushtra taught that all that is

created is the creation of the Good God, thus all that is created is good. However, the negative mentality of the mind brings about violence, chaos, injustice and unhappiness. It is the duty of each Zoroastrian to refresh the world to its pristine state by choosing, through free will, that which is good. Where good is described as "only that is good for oneself which is good for any body whatsoever." Here the any body refers to all that is created. This process of refreshing the soul of the mother earth is the regeneration we are all working towards. Thus, regeneration will bring forth the fruits that refresh. To 'refresh' simply put, is our daily duty, and is not reserved for some notion for the 'end of time'.

Islam and regeneration

Islam looks at society from three perspectives: the individual, family and community. A social responsibility is a concept, which is deep, rooted in Islamic practices and traditions and therefore the well being of the community in terms of health, housing, education, employment and training are all embedded in the Islamic norms. Recent experiences in Britain and other parts of the globe indicate a need for greater understanding of faiths and a commitment to finding solutions within a multi faith society.

Regeneration programmes are a positive way of reassuring Muslims that they have a future in the West. Stereotypical images of Muslims as terrorists and members of Al Qaeda is undermining relations between Muslims and British society. It is also damaging the UK Government's attempts to create an inclusive society. Faith communities are extremely well placed to play a pivotal role in regeneration, social and economic development and promoting voice and participation, particularly within disadvantaged communities.

Community Cohesion

Again as there are a number of

variant definitions of community cohesion, most will have a common understanding that community cohesion will produce a society that recognises, acknowledges and respects the different communities and their values that comprise it (the society). The debates about what is a true or best definition are often focussed on the 'measures' used by the various non-faith based camps as they rely on quantitative measures. Faith based camps are content with a qualitative approach.

Given the above, it is clear to see how the omni-present moral drivers of faith traditions provide a holistic approach to the environment that we live in provides the 'cohesiveness' that is sought by all. It is hoped that the title 'Building Community Cohesion through Faith-Based Regeneration' has been addressed as promised in the introduction.

Harmander Singh

Principal Advisor to Sikhs in England, and member of FbRN

¹The Faith Based Regeneration Network (FbRN) is drawn from nine faith traditions: Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian. It was established in 2001 by and for regeneration practitioners who identify with faith traditions, or who work with or for faith community organisations. It is the first time that practitioners have come together from a range of faith traditions in this way, and is the only organisation of its kind in Britain.

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Book Review

The Golden Age and Decline of Islamic Civilisation

The Golden Age and Decline of Islamic Civilisation, by Dr Salah Eddine Zaimeche Al-Djazairi, describes the achievements of Islamic civilization and examines its decline.

Muslim civilization was able to register remarkable achievements, its legacy is visible in great architectural works, modern sciences and learning, trigonometry; surgery, optics, the Arabic numerals. Stars' names, gardens and gardening, hospital care; university learning, early knowledge of India, China and Scandinavia, etc. It was not just Arabs or Muslims who were involved in the great legacy, but all ethnic groups and faiths. The Islamic policy of inclusion went along with other manifestations of the same nature; medical care, as an example, was afforded to all, and so was education, and even power, at the highest echelons, was open to non-Muslims.

In *The Golden Age and Decline of Islamic Civilisation*, the author (also penned *The Hidden Debt to Islamic Civilisation*) uses his wide experience as an historian and academic, to provide the reader with a wealth and in-depth study of Islamic civilization

and the causes of its decline.

Historians often separate the rise and achievements of Islamic civilization from its Islamic inspiration and roots, for example, Western literature describe Islamic civilization and achievement as a mere reproduction of other civilizations, the Greek above all. The author strongly argues that whilst older historians of Islam and its civilization, despite their shortcomings, contributed greatly to the understanding of Islamic civilization, their modern counterparts, on the whole, are lacking in different intellectual dimension.

This book is packed with referenced facts and includes substantial bibliographies. It is set to become an indispensable standard reference work for the subject and the starting point for anyone wanting to explore this area further.

The Golden Age and Decline of Islamic Civilisation, by Dr S.E. Zaimeche Al-Djazairi, is published by Bayt Al-Hikma Press, July 2006, 832 pp.

For more information or to buy the book, visit www.baytalthikma.co.uk or ask at your local bookshop (ISBN: 09551 15639 - £16.95 RRP).

