

Pakistan Muslim Welfare Association – 18 July 2010

First of all, let me say how delighted I am to be here at your AGM. This annual event is significant not only in terms of what it tells us about the on-going developments and achievements of your Association, it also marks the good works which the Association has carried out over the years and of which you should all be very proud. What is laudable is that you have continued to work steadfastly as you have faced daunting challenges and mounting pressures, especially since 9/11 with the stigmatization of Britain's Muslim communities reaching new peaks.

What are these challenges with which you have had to cope? Some of the fundamental issues that you have had to consider come under the heading of identity, belonging and loyalty. The question that is repeatedly asked is "Who are you?" What is your response to the question that Norman Tebbit posed back in 1990: "Are you still harking back to where you came from or where you are?" Do you genuinely see Woking as your home and all that it entails in your imagination and emotions? Do you see Islam as your faith but Britishness as your national identity in the same way that Christians or Jews or other faith communities see their faiths and their national affiliations? Even if you

don't, would your children and grandchildren have a much deeper bond with the land of their birth or will they still be harking back to Pakistan? Because if you do continue to maintain what we might call 'a migratory mindset' – seeing yourselves as exiles in a strange land - then you and arguably your families will find it difficult to be at ease here. And this could be very demoralising and psychologically destabilising.

The way that you feel about Britain and Woking, the communities in which you live, is a product of your experiences of the interactions between yourselves and your social and cultural world. How the wider community perceives you in return has a bearing on how you respond. Let us consider what this means and how it impacts on your lives. One of the erroneous perceptions that persists in wider society is that Muslims are newcomers and foreigners in Britain; that Islam is an alien religion; that it arrived only recently with no deep historical and organic links with the customs, traditions and values of British society such as those claimed for Christianity and even Judaism. The consequence of holding this view is that it denies Muslims legitimacy, ownership and a stake in this their homeland. It denies them entitlements and privileges taken for granted by the majority population. In order to feel differently

about Britain and your place here, you need to challenge this perception and you can do so powerfully because it has little historical validity.

Muslims have been coming to Britain for centuries and have made significant contributions to British society. Woking has been prominent in this history. The Shahjahan Mosque, as we all know, goes back 120 years. There is also the Muslim Burial Ground at Horsell Common where a number of Muslim soldiers were buried when they died on British soil during the First and Second World Wars. Are we, or for that matter the wider community, aware of the great contribution that Muslim soldiers made to the Allied cause in the two world wars? Thousands sacrificed their lives for 'King and country'; they died fighting defending British rights and liberties and the nation's most cherished values. Their ultimate contribution reflected a commitment and unity of heroic proportions. My point here is that since these Muslims belonging to earlier generations gave their lives for this country, there needs to be greater recognition of the part that they played in Britain's historical past.

If we carry on looking at 'history', then the second thing of which you can certainly be proud is the great resilience that Muslim communities have displayed here, where having overcome adversity, they have constantly sought to improve their lives. Earlier research has suggested that there are currently well over 10,000 Muslim millionaires in Britain, with liquid assets of more than £31 billion. British Pakistanis now occupy a range of professional occupations, they run successful business ventures in property, food, services and fashion, to mention but a few arenas. Small-scale enterprises worth billions of pounds continue to expand, even in the face of economic crisis. Working alone has plenty of British Pakistanis making great strides in public service as politicians, entrepreneurs and professionals. So you can see that Muslims here are making a noteworthy economic contribution to the life of this country.

Alongside these more high-profile advances, the silent majority of British Muslims are getting on with the task of harmonising the different aspects of their lives with the demands of living and working in a twenty-first century modern society. For them, it would seem, while there may be challenges, there is nothing particularly incompatible about their Islam and modern Britain. Indeed, being Muslim means being guided by

the same factors that steer other people in society: concern about the plight of others here and elsewhere, of the challenges facing the young, the old, the sick, the disadvantaged and the future.

Recognition, of course, is a very important element for strengthening the feeling of belonging to a culture, community, nation and state, especially for former migrant groups. The status of citizen implies a sense of inclusion into the wider community. It recognises the contribution that a particular individual makes to that community while at the same time granting him or her individual autonomy. Citizenship through the sense of belonging creates an emotional bond with the nation and culture in which the individual finds himself or herself. .

The concern for British Muslims is that they perceive of themselves as being unequal in citizenship terms to their majority counterparts. How can British Muslims feel a sense of citizenship? This can only happen if Muslim practices are not seen as being at odds with Western values and equality is established institutionally and in terms of political and cultural representation and rights and there is a genuine recognition of their value.

Muslims, as we all know, are playing a full and active part in British society. Many are economically vibrant, culturally creative, socially-aware. They offer a commitment to the integrity of family, a respect for the wisdom of tradition, a belief in the importance of compassion and the need to help the vulnerable, a commitment to enterprise, hard work and individual ambition. They desire peace across the globe. They share these values and aspirations with the wider community and through the pursuit of these they enrich modern Britain. For this they and you should feel enormously proud.

As wider British society perhaps begins to move away, albeit hesitantly, from negative images and stereotypes to a more positive understanding of Islam and Muslims, we can also detect an increasing recognition in the Establishment of the needs, concerns and aspirations of British Muslims. During the past few years, for instance, there has been greater acknowledgement of the Muslim contribution to the development of British business. Muslims, too, are demonstrating their wish to enter into meaningful dialogue in a spirit of reconciliation and full participation. Muslims, previously perceived to be out of touch with the

tenor, traditions and values of British society, isolated at the margins, seem to be now much more part of the mainstream.

And you, the PMWA, have made a significant contribution to this positive development.

I would like now to talk a bit about the history of Woking from a Muslim perspective, and suggest in the process some of the lessons that we might learn from the past.

As some of you will no doubt be aware, it was in the late nineteenth century that a small mosque 'of considerable beauty' was built in the small and 'sedate' town of Woking, Surrey. Located in a very English rural setting, it became – perhaps surprisingly - the symbol and centre of Muslim activity in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century. For many decades it attracted great interest from Muslims, high and low, in Britain and abroad.

Its history, however, was not without its ups and downs. After the death of the main driving force behind its construction, Leitner, in 1899, the

site fell into disuse until Khwaja Kamaluddin, a barrister from Lahore, answering 'a call from within', arrived in England in 1912 to take up missionary work, laying the foundations of the Woking Muslim Mission here in 1913. The mosque proceeded to acquire symbolic and organisational centrality in the inter-war period for British Islam. Muslim dignitaries from abroad, including Amir Feisal of Saudi Arabia, invariably made a point of attending prayers at the mosque on their visits to Britain.

What is important to note is that one of the Mission's main objectives was to build a viable Muslim community in Britain, in part through conversion. In this respect, it proved to be quite successful. But it is also important to note that its members believed that for Islam to prosper in Britain, it would have to be 'indigenised' (as had been the case elsewhere), something that would not happen if it continued to be perceived as an 'alien' and 'exotic' religion. Hence, the Muslims connected with the mosque trod delicately as they pursued this strategy. Contentious polemics were carefully avoided. Nothing was said that could possibly offend anybody's religious susceptibilities. Common ground was consciously sought. Audiences were encouraged

to do their own thinking. We should remember that this period from around the time of the First World War onwards, was not an easy one for Muslims – Islam as a religion was frequently subject to criticism, while Muslims in many parts of the world were stereotyped as 'backward', 'fanatical', and 'violent', oppressing its women left, right and centre. The Ottoman empire may have expired thanks to the war, but legacies of anti-Turkish sentiment and prejudice continued to distort Western attitudes to Muslims and their religion. Woking's Muslims, therefore, were faced with the huge task of rebutting these misperceptions, even when it seemed like the tide was against them.

Through the journal of the Woking Mission, *The Islamic Review* (distributed widely and free of charge), the Mission's leading lights elaborated their views on the position of women in Islam, polygamy, prohibition on drinking of alcohol and eating of pork, usury, gambling and circumcision, fasting, *zakat* (wealth tax) and prayer, and many other issues which aroused controversy or seemed at variance with Christian practice. Instead of highlighting the differences between Christianity and Islam, they emphasised the commonality of the Abrahamic tradition of which the two religions, along with Judaism, they claimed, formed an

important part. Quoting the Quran, they preached tolerance, stating that there was 'no compulsion in religion'.

These early British Muslims were equally accommodating in their social behaviour. Much of their work was conducted with a light touch in a convivial atmosphere with due regard for the social etiquette, conventions and customs, modes of conduct and practices current at the time. British cultural forms were adopted to give as little an impression of 'strangeness' as possible. Every year the Prophet's birthday was celebrated in London with festivities to which Muslim and non-Muslim luminaries were invited from all over the country. After the formal proceedings, which invariably included speeches, entertainment took a semi-religious or non-religious culturally diverse form. Fundamental to their strategy was their view that for Islam to prosper it has always had to borrow and graft on elements from other cultures. Following on from this understanding of cultural evolution they believed that 'nations can change dress, discard customs, supplement ideas and conceptions, improve social institutions and the rest without incurring the charge of 'Westernization' themselves.

Throughout the inter-war period, the Woking Mission developed the notion not just of inter-faith dialogue but that the religion of all reasonable people was the same. It is fascinating to see how they addressed some of the fundamental issues on which they might have felt vulnerable and under attack. On the question of apostasy, for instance, they categorically denied that the punishment was the death penalty. Wearing the veil in the British environment was deemed to be quite impracticable. Indeed, public gatherings organised by the Mission and its offshoots were generally mixed affairs, as were the religious festivals and the larger congregations. Similarly, on the question of *halal* meat, the *fatwa* of Muhammad Abduh, the rector of Cairo's famous Islamic seminary Al-Azhar, allowing the consumption of meat that had not been properly ritually slaughtered, was accepted (Abduh had sanctioned this in line with the Islamic principle of necessity or *darura*). In these ways, we can observe a dynamic on-going engagement with wider British society of the time. The aim was to weave Islam and Muslims organically into Britain's fabric.

Another key aim of these Muslims was to overcome sectarian prejudices within Muslim communities themselves. This commitment was

reflected in the diversity present within the congregation, which on occasions included the head of the Ismailis, the Aga Khan, as well as the Shi'i stalwart of Islam, Syed Ameer Ali. Aware of the dangers inherent in allegations of any kind of doctrinal bias, Kamaluddin (who himself nominally belonged to the Lahori branch of the Ahmadaiyya Movement) and the later *imams* consciously rotated those who led the congregations in order to represent a diversity of Muslim nations and followers of different schools of thought including, among others, the Hejaz Minister Hafiz Wahba, Abdullah Yusuf Ali, the Grand Mufti of Palestine, and Marmaduke Pickthall.

As you are well aware, the Woking Mosque flourishes to this day – it now serves a local Muslim community of over 5,000, many of whom have links with Pakistan. Friday congregations regularly run into several hundreds. What is remarkable is that the kinds of issues debated by the earlier Woking Muslims have re-emerged: 'swine and wine', the original 'Satanic Verses', apostasy and the Blasphemy law, loyalty to the British state versus the *umma*, and the thorny question of identity. All these issues continue to be of as much concern to contemporary British Muslims (if not more) as they were to those in the first half of the

twentieth century, and while the approaches of the present generation may have changed in addressing these matters, these issues, among others, undoubtedly continue to shape British Muslim engagement with wider society.

Why I have talked briefly about the history of the Muslim community in Woking is because I believe that by knowing more about it Muslims in today's Woking might be able to draw some important lessons about how to respond to the current rather difficult circumstances that face British Muslims.

Take, for example, the use of the term 'Jihad' in justification of armed violence, an issue linked to the problem of so-called 'Islamic terrorism' that none of us can ignore. The Woking Mission would surely have exhorted us to bear witness to the greater Jihad and to channel all our energies and efforts into carrying out a Jihad against combating violence, drug abuse, criminality, and anti-social behaviour instead. These early Muslims in Woking would have called for Jihad against extremism, against the pollution of our ecological environment. They would have campaigned for the mobilisation of resources for the welfare of those in

need, and given generously to charitable causes, just as you no doubt have been doing for many years.

Instead of a knee-jerk reaction in the face of abuse and insult hurled by malign individuals and hostile media, they showed forbearance and a tolerance and generosity of spirit, inspired by the life and achievements of their Prophet. So, for instance, when you feel misrepresented, maligned or stigmatised by attacks on Islam, by depictions of the Prophet as a terrorist in cartoons, by being deemed a suspect community, what should your response be? I know that it all fills us with much anger. But, rather than seeking revenge through violence, isn't it much more effective to hold on to patience, to show forbearance and forgiveness and maintain a sense of unshakeable dignity, as your predecessors in Woking did? For those early Woking Muslims, martyrs were not those who perpetrate terror but the innocent victims of such terror.

Finally, one thing that I have noticed is the small number of women who are present here today. I would like to ask what this does for the image of your community in wider society? Surely their absence reinforces

some of the unfortunate stereotypes that are held about us: that Muslim women are passive, submissive, childlike creatures, under the control of their men, incapable of shouldering responsibility, who have an assigned role in the domestic sphere; that Muslim communities and their institutions, such as this Association, are incorrigibly patriarchal affairs in which women have no public role. But this is a one-dimensional picture. We all know that Muslim women in Britain have become increasingly active in the public sphere. They have made marvellous contributions in areas of social and cultural life where, like in your Association, care and welfare has been the focus. They have gathered huge amounts of resources for relief and humanitarian campaigns. They have immense talents and capabilities. Look at the growing presence of Muslim women in public life, as personalities on television and radio, as professional and businesswomen. But the problem is despite all that they have to offer, to their communities and to wide society, much of this dynamism remains untapped.

To illustrate the potential that exists out there, you must have noticed that of the Muslims elected to the House of Commons in the recent general elections in May, three – Rushanara Ali and Yasmin Qureshi and

Shabana Mahmood – are energetic high-flying young women. Shouldn't the energies and skills of such women be harnessed? The pay-back would be fantastic! By encouraging Muslim women's participation in a whole range of activities that are not restricted by gender 'norms', your Association will undoubtedly project a much more inclusive vision of your community, something that you will be able to share with wider British society in more enthusiastic and willing ways. Equally, by meeting their specific needs and concerns, you can help to improve greatly the quality and standard of the services that you offer, shining a bright light on your pursuit of humane and useful causes. So, by way of concluding my talk today, I would urge you to pay more attention to how this deficit - in participation and representation at the level of membership and decision-making – might be overcome. Be bold and take the lead, just as Muslims in Woking did around a hundred years ago!