

All Party Parliamentary Group: Faith and Society
Minutes of meeting: 22 March 2016
Discussion on Faith and Extremism

Panel: Rt. Hon. Stephen Timms MP (chair)
Rt. Hon. Liam Byrne MP
Fiona Bruce MP
Raheel Mohammed, Director, Maslaha
David Brown, Education Consultant

The meeting was open to the public.

Minutes (summary of discussion)

1. **The Rt Hon. Stephen Timms MP** welcomed those present and introduced himself as chair of the APPG and MP for East Ham.

He said that the background to the meeting was the growing concern that an assumption is appearing in public policy that if someone is religious, they are suspected of being an extremist. This emerges in the Prevent policy and in the recent announcement that Ofsted will be inspecting Sunday schools and other faith activities for young people.

The APPG exists to highlight positive things that faith groups are doing in communities and it members think that it is much more likely that being religious protects a person from extremism than that it makes them more likely to be extremist. It seemed time to have a wider public discussion of these matters.

Stephen introduced the panel:

- The Rt Hon Liam Byrne is the Labour MP for Birmingham Hodge Hill, a very diverse area. He has been thinking on these issues in recent weeks.
- Fiona Bruce is the Conservative MP for Congleton, a member of the parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights and a campaigner for freedom of religion and belief.
- David Brown is an education consultant, a Christian, and became headteacher in one of the Birmingham schools that was discussed in the 'Trojan horse' episode.
- Raheel Mohammed is the founder and director of Maslaha, an organisation that creates new ways of tackling longstanding issues affecting the Muslim community. It was included in the *Observer* list of organisations creating radical new solutions.

2. **The Rt Hon Liam Byrne MP** said that it was a privilege to share a stage with Stephen Timms and Fiona Bruce. He said that the terrorist attacks in Brussels [that morning] underline just how vital this conversation is and our hearts go out to those affected. There is clear evidence that this is the 'surge of the century': there were more terrorism-related arrests last year than ever before. Record numbers of people are fleeing war zones and leaving Europe to fight in war zones. This underlines the need for a rethink on how we take on some of these challenges.

Liam set out his thoughts under three headings: the power of the extremist narrative; a critique of the way in which some are putting counter-arguments; and a better way of taking on the challenges.

In much media discussion there is very little about just why the extremist narrative is so attractive to so many. There are an estimated 35,000-40,000 people fighting for the so-called Islamic State in the Middle East.

Daesh propaganda appears as something between the Call of Duty videogame and a pop video, but analysis shows six key elements of the extremist narrative – six 'P's:

- An appeal to *piety*. This tactic is common to heretics. Around 114 surahs of the Qur'an are quoted to back up the Daesh position.
- *Purpose* – runs like golden thread throughout.
- The offer of a way to restore *pride*.
- *Potency* – a winner's narrative, with the imagery of success and victory: the iconography of power.
- *Perfectionism* – the call to come and build a utopia.
- *Provocation* – the sense that there is certainly a war between Islam and the West and that good Muslims should 'come and join our side'. The clash of civilisations is a cornerstone of the extremist narrative.

This is a rich cocktail, brought to life in propaganda videos, forums and so on.

Some, such as the Rt Hon Michael Gove MP, argue that we should contend with this narrative using a 'conveyor belt' theory. This takes the view that individuals are on a journey that begins with religious conservatism and moves seamlessly to acts of violence. This idea is mentioned three times in the Prime Minister's speeches and in Michael Gove's book. A policy maker with this kind of linear view will be tempted to introduce constraints on religious piety and conservatism. Such actions begin to look like an attack on free speech and on Islam.

A survey was conducted in Liam's constituency this year. 96% of respondents reported the belief that islamophobia is on the rise. 87% had experienced it themselves, or knew someone who had.

A policy response that constrains religious piety carries the danger of not disabling the 'clash of civilisations' model, but rather of reinforcing it.

Liam said that more work needs to be done on counter narratives, and that in his opinion the Labour party has not contributed enough to the debate.

An alternative model is what he calls the 'fork in the road' theory. It should be noted that people get angry about all kinds of things. A Catholic priest pointed out to him that few people in history are as radical as Jesus was. When you see young people who are angry at injustice and demanding change, that is not something to be stamped on! Having become angry, some people reach a 'fork in the road' and choose a non-peaceful path towards change. Evidence from Martin Seligman and the MI5 behavioural science team reinforces this model, rather than the conveyor belt theory. If this is the model, the question to answer is how to ensure that someone who is angry and wants to see change will choose the peaceful path when they reach the fork in the road.

Giving people a sense that they are a part of the history of this country means that they are more likely to take a peaceful part in change in future. Most young people in Liam's constituency have no idea how big the Muslim sacrifice was in World War I. When they find out about this, it transforms their idea of their family's investment in the country and the blood that they shed for it.

We also need to change the way in which we give some communities a role in governing the country. This could provide them with a meaningful way of changing the country.

Character education is another idea. In Birmingham we have worked hard to develop a curriculum for character education, which focuses on virtues rather than “British values”. In Hodge Hill we are looking at how to create a common credo, whereby people of different faiths create a shared moral framework that will help children take good decisions when they reach the fork in the road.

There are other good ideas, such as National Citizen Service for young people, which helps young people to get outside of their own local areas. This should be expanded to cover all young people. The debate needs to go up many levels.

3. **Fiona Bruce MP** said that it was a pleasure to follow Liam Byrne and to see how thoughtfully he is approaching this issue.

Fiona said that her opinion as member of the international development select committee is that unless we tackle this issue, there is a real threat not only to security at home but also globally. When terrible things happen, people want security, but governments need to be careful not to over-react. Legislation can override fundamental freedoms such as freedom of speech. In Russia for example, Jehovah’s Witnesses have been declared extremists. Donald Trump has given his view on restricting entry by Muslims to the US. This is a worrying international trend because we need a healthy civil society in order to hold governments to account. We in the UK are not immune to this trend.

Governments are devising vague sets of values, making it easy to arrest those who ‘break’ them. In this country we see that the Counter-Extremism Strategy published in the autumn has a definition of extremism which is very vague. It talks about extremism as something that challenges “fundamental values that have evolved over centuries”. We need to challenge that because we need non-majority views to be represented – it is called democracy. In addition, there is no definition of non-violent extremism here.

For example, Fiona said, I might say at this meeting that I respect scientologists as human beings but I don’t respect the beliefs of scientology. Does it make me an extremist? According to this definition, it does, because vocal opposition to different faiths and beliefs counts as extremism.

There is a serious danger of shutting down free speech and freedom of religious expression as a result of not getting this right. There is a danger of religion being ‘privatised’ [made part of the private domain]. Then what would be the difference from the situation in North Korea, where people can have their own beliefs as long as they do not express them? Self-censorship is already occurring – we need to guard against it.

Another example is the increasing amount of registration that governments are requiring on the part of groups they seek to monitor. In the UK it has been proposed that any organisation that teaches young people for more than six hours per week should register and potentially be inspected. This would fundamentally alter the relationship between religious organisations and the state – we have never required registration in this way before. Professor Julian Rivers says that this would amount to a fundamental reversal of the British constitutional settlement between religion and the state. He goes on to say that any compulsory scheme would be in breach of UK’s international human rights obligations.

Therefore any such step is something that we must scrutinise very carefully. Someone scrutinising what I say to a group of young people is, in effect, the state making a decision as to whether my religious beliefs are good or not.

Other examples are the teaching that marriage is between a man and a woman: people are resisting referring to this in religious contexts. Or creationism: I am a creationist, so does that make me an extremist? Teachers are reluctant even to mention it.

Fiona expressed the belief that the Government is looking carefully at these implications – there is a lot of consultation going on, but there does not appear to be satisfactory coordination across Government with regard to bringing forward elements of the strategy. People are worried that if they express certain views as a charity trustee they could be accused of undermining public trust and confidence. But democracy assumes that people will express disagreement.

In practical terms, people need to speak more widely about freedom of religion. The atrocities in the Middle East should be named as a genocide. The Department for International Development (DFID) should look at religious persecution as a cause of poverty across the globe: 60,000 people were excluded from Mosul on account of their faith. DFID should be braver. Greater religious literacy is needed across the country, both for those still in education and those who have left it. There should be an ambassador for religious freedom.

Democracy is diminished if religion is pushed out of the public sphere. International security will be threatened if restrictions are placed on religious freedom. The frustration that this would entail will result in increased tension and then violence, and if that is the case the terrorists will have won. Without religious freedom it is unlikely we will find lasting global peace.

4. **Raheel Mohammed** said that he would speak about the work of Maslaha and the mood in the communities it works with. The organisation works in the areas of health, education and criminal justice, among others. This means that it does not see communities as a single issue.

Maslaha held an event at the end of last year to explore the idea of dissent. It also wanted to have a public debate about the effect of the Prevent programme in schools. The event involved a book called the Book of Travels, which highlighted how ideas have always been exchanged. Students explored what it means to be a rebel. Maslaha put across the idea that it is good to dissent and to be a rebel – in fact dissent is a fundamental British value, although but currently policy is saying that it is not. However, at the event there was a genuine fear about talking too openly about policy – even though this was taking place in an arts centre at an event focused on exploring dissent! A couple of people asked not to be quoted on Twitter. Raheel found this shocking.

Raheel said that we need more language, as current language is very narrow, especially around Islam.

Maslaha has just launched a report on the experience of young Muslim men in the criminal justice system, as part of the Young Review: *Improving outcomes for young black and/or Muslim men in the Criminal Justice System*. In England and Wales, Muslims make up 4.4% of the population, but in prison they make up 13% and in young offenders' institutions, 22-23%. A number of these men see Islam as an anchor, both while they are within the system and when they come out. From conversations with professionals in the justice system, Islamic practice, even at a very basic level, is seen as being threatening. For example, a group of

Muslim men gathered together to pray might be viewed as a gang. There were examples of Muslim men shaving their beards off in the hope of receiving a more lenient sentence, and of prayer mats being used as rugs.

As regards schools, it is difficult to understand what materials teachers are given when they are given the Prevent materials. It seems that on a Monday morning, teachers might be told that they must look out for signs of extremism, but without being given any help on what that means.

Nurses, doctors and teachers are very comfortable with the idea of using culture and religion to obtain better outcomes for those they work with, but are nervous about what to do as regards extremism. Raheel said he could not think what this would mean for the criminal justice system.

Over 1,800 under-15s have been referred to the Prevent programme – but we do not hear about the knock-on and psychological effects on their families and communities.

As Hilary Mantel said: “All those straight borders – they’re all lies”. Borders wrap around knowledge and cultures as well. We need not to let them constrain us, intellectually or physically.

5. **David Brown** said that he wanted to give a school’s perspective. He said he has the privilege of leading an Islamic school with his colleague Aisha Mohammed. It was already a good school before his involvement. He said that he wanted to talk about concept of resilience, which is peppered through Prevent. Birmingham has a director who talks very highly about young people at the Islamic school – on the day after the Paris attacks he said that they students were some of the most articulate exponents of living in a modern city you might find. On the other hand, David said that he sometimes shows audiences some quotes about God wanting people to bomb others – a trick because the quotes originate with the Christian Right in the USA.

David said that the history curriculum is unbelievably traditional and its need for more history of the Islamic world is staggering. Resilience for some of us is developed because we have a very clear sense of where we come from. This means that we can discount erroneous views. Therefore, the narrower we make the curriculum, the less we serve the students.

After Paris the teachers at David’s school talked about what it meant. They were having these sorts of conversations this even before the Trojan horse episode, visiting synagogues and churches, and so on. Ironically, if an environment is created in which some of the best colleagues in the school are a bit nervous about engaging in debate in case someone is suspicious about what they are saying – if you never express an opinion – the dialogue is never had. Critical conversation is a part of British values. If we allow an environment in which we do not do that, we will struggle, and there will be self-censorship and fear. Today, staff at the school will be talking about Belgium, and that level of engagement is important.

The preconceptions of school inspectors about what goes on in a Muslim school are staggering – and this is a standard, voluntary aided school under the education laws.

It is interesting that at the school there is an Islamic scholar in his view, the problem is that the school does not have enough Islam. For example, people should be discussing the power of prayer, which is often a uniting factor among people of faith.

We have allowed the debate to be defined by the media, whereas what we need is a richer

more intellectual discussion of *faith*.

7. **Stephen Timms** invited further comments and questions from the floor, taking several questions at a time [note: speakers did not always identify themselves clearly, so they are not named below, although their affiliations are stated where possible].

Question: [Representative of a Muslim educational trust] I have been campaigning for state funding of Muslim education for many years. A Muslim teacher is a role model – a non-Muslim teacher is not. What about the Muslims killed by US and UK bomb attacks? People do not care. The Trojan horse schools were excellent in the eyes of Ofsted – because they were teaching Islamic values, not British values. The 7/7 bombers were product of the British education system, not Muslim schools.

Question: [Representative of the Church of Scientology] When people think of extremism, many think of Islam, but has anyone looked at parallels with Northern Ireland, Sri Lanka and other places?

Question: [Representative of the Near Neighbours Programme] The state always looks at the need to control the situation, but we can also look from the view of trying to strengthen civil society and how we work well together – how do we build a narrative about how we live well together?

Question: [Representative of *Christian Today*] In the light of Brussels, what would you like to see as response to the #StopIslam campaign?

Liam Byrne: Our starting point has got to be the role of civil society, but Government writes laws and budgets so is also important. I get young people to debate: how would you spend a million pounds? Would you spend it on extra sorties over Syria or on National Citizen Service here? Most choose the latter. We should be debating this as a spending priority. We should be significantly investing in programmes like Near Neighbours. We spend a lot on the 'hard end' of conflict management and very little on integration. The balance of UK spending in Afghanistan is so much more in favour of military rather than civil aid. It is comprehensively out of balance. We need to nurture a policy that looks at the assets we have got and looks to widen them.

On how we respond to that hashtag: the narrative has to be a defence of pluralism and diversity. The Daesh project is to roll many countries into one caliphate, with all of the different schools of Islam that involves. It eliminates freedom of conscience for Muslims. And freedom of conscience, freedom from fear, is something we share and can unite on.

David Brown: When I was 35 we were looking at bombing in Northern Ireland and got our students to look at that as part of their citizenship journey. That period did a great deal of damage to relationships with Irish Catholics and if we are not careful we will repeat it.

Raheel Mohammed: It is not very difficult to provide an alternative narrative. We launched a project called Muslim Girls Fence as part of International Women's Day. Girls fenced and we staged was a film exhibition. The film went viral. This year the US has a black Muslim woman in hijab as part of their Olympic team. So it's about widening the language. The way to do that is partly by creating new partnerships, and moving away from normal way of doing things. All of our projects mobilise communities to come up with solutions and do things in new ways. A systemic approach is needed. The mayor of New York recently talked about the number of young black men in the criminal justice system. He referred to the numbers excluded from

school, which are huge. We therefore need to think about where these people are all going to end up. We should also be talking to companies like Apple (but not in the sense of making it technology companies' responsibility) – they should be a part of the group, given a steer.

Stephen Timms: The concerns being raised affect people from across the different faith groups. A response to Brussels limiting the freedom of Muslims would cause other faith groups to suffer too. By standing for freedom for all faith groups we take a stand for everyone.

Question: [Representative of the Christian Muslim Forum] Can someone please respond to first point?

Question: The inference is that us adults will be good at teaching children how to be British, but history seems to tell us that children are better at living multiculturally. David, what are you learning from your children that is fresh?

Question: On resilience, there are associated protective factors. Do young people have opportunities to develop a sense of purpose? Access to housing, food resources and income outside the labour market is beyond the imagination of much debate. The reductions to youth services are part of a catalogue of things that have undermined the protective factors. Also, absent from panel today is the recognition that we are talking into a very unequal society – I am not proud of this, or of the disastrous interventions in the Middle East, or an economy based on arms trade. From a Christian perspective we need to look at the interventions that create wars.

Question: I would love to see more public debate and a lot more Muslims speaking out regarding atrocities. I do not hear it much that Muslims say 'we have to do something about it'. Also, why is that if there are many Muslims who do not accept that God made Christians and Muslims?

Response from audience member: It is in the Qur'an that God created Muslims, Christians, Jews and everyone. We do not endorse terrorism; what more can we do – write it on our foreheads? I am very supportive of Liam's five 'P's – although not of the point about provocation. We need to reflect on how we look at religion. Government is endorsing many neo-con organisations. We need to look at this and I am glad that we are having this debate. We need to look at what the counter-narratives could be and what the Prevent measures are. We need to look at these things separately. Regarding behavioural insights, the children referred to Prevent are very young, and such a programme is v divisive. I appreciate Maslaha's work but giving young girls fencing is giving them special treatment and we do not need that. We all need to endorse freedom of religion and speech.

Stephen Timms: We have not picked up on the first question and I know that you have emailed me about this. Your view is that all Muslim children should be taught only by Muslims in Muslim schools. That seems to me impossible. We need to ensure that all children get a very good education wherever they are. How does that system need to look, given the events in Brussels and the Prevent programme? There is now an obligation on teachers to make a report if they see young people doing things which might suggests they are being radicalised. Are there practical ways through which, if we reject the conveyor belt theory, we can ask teachers and others to act and that which will not create the problems that the Prevent duty has created?

Liam Byrne: I reject the idea of Muslims being taught only in Muslim settings: I think it is profoundly retrograde. On the point about moral anger: most progress in human civilisation has been made because people were bloody angry about something, not because people

thought everything was fine. That is why it is very bad for government to impose constraints on people who are angry about injustice. Debate should absolutely happen in classrooms. There is a strong argument that we should nurture young people's anger at injustice but encourage them to take the peaceful path when they reach the fork in the road.

At the level of the school, every government in Europe is contending with how you de-securitize the school environment, and I think we need to reframe the debate around safeguarding: how can we keep children safe, and create an environment in which they choose the right course rather than the wrong? The way to deliver good policy is by relying on the discretion and the professional, balanced judgements of frontline professionals. If they are taking decisions that result in the chilling of debate, that is a bad outcome in a liberal society. So we need to give them an obligation to safeguard the child *and* to encourage debate. My sense is there is a very risk-averse approach going on in classrooms, with the attitude of 'chucking things over the fence' to the police and security services.

This does require us to be much more thorough and forensic about British values – and I would be interested to know how many people know what British values are! They are listed in the Prevent strategy. But compassion, which is top of the list when I ask people what they think British values are, is not on the list. I am being provocative to the Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP about this at the moment.

We need to start talking about ideals, not just values, and also about virtues – the kinds of character we want our young people to grow up with.

David Brown: I agree with Liam.

Raheel Mohammed: I think for us as an organisation, we start by looking at the context, which is cultural, economic, political and about the relationships that exist or don't. That means the response will be complex – it takes a lot of different people to come up with ideas.

8. **Stephen Timms** encouraged those present to email him if they had thoughts that they had not had the chance to express and which they would like the APPG to take forward. He thanked the audience and the speakers for attending.

Date of next meeting: *Annual General Meeting, Tuesday 7 June 2016, 3pm, Room Q, Portcullis House*