Draft conference speech by Furrkh Aslam

When I was asked to perform this speech on Islamophobia, I must admit there was a certain amount of trepidation. I had visions of bearded men shouting obscenities at me ..and then I woke up. I note that in the documentation for the conference, I have been hailed as an expert and have been placed in very august company.

Let me therefore make a confession, if I have an expertise in anything then it alludes to my academic discipline which centres around computer science, and the expertise has been the result of having misunderstood the subject for a long time. In fact I have made a career of talking with authority about things I know little of.

So to continue in that vein, I come to Islamophobia. There are real experts on the subject for example Dr Chris Allen springs to mind. Having admitted my lack of expertise, I asked myself what could I bring to this speech that could possibly have any value? Well, I was born a Muslim, and practise Islam in such a desultory fashion as to be a continued source of worry for my mother who is worried about what I shall say to Allah on the day of judgement.

So I am going to deal with Islamophobia in the guise of a neophyte, one who has had an upbringing in both western and Muslim cultures, and one who aspires to pick the best of both. My English wife says that she on the one hand envies me because of the ease with which I can enter both cultures and on the other hand is worried for me because she thinks that I am in an uncomfortable position where both sides often feel they can have a go at me about what the other side says or does.

I am going to explore with you this morning this phenomenon of Islamophobia. I am going to discuss what it is, whether it exists and what we can do about it.

The appropriate starting point, I think is to agree on a working definition of Islamophobia. The online OED states that it is:-

" hatred or fear of Islam or Muslims, especially as a political force"

1997, the British Runnymede Trust defined Islamophobia as the "dread or hatred of Islam and therefore, to the fear and dislike of all Muslims,"

Interestingly some dictionaries do not actually carry the word at all. There is something that the medical profession may contribute here. According to the Online medical dictionary a phobia is defined as:

'an abnormal intense and irrational fear of a given situation, organism, or object'

The telling point here is the term 'irrational' –so the word Islamophobia could be argued to suggest an irrational hatred of or fear of Islam or Muslims...

Now, does this irrational fear actually exist, simply because a word exists and a concept exists, it does not necessarily follow that the condition exists. So what evidence is there that there is this fear of Muslims or Islam? One does not have to go far to find evidence of this. A simple search on various sources of media, for example the internet, will yield an absolute avalanche of information.

The trick is to sift through it all. I came across many videos, textual sources which provide a great deal of empirical evidence that Islamophobia exists. However, let me take an anecdotal aside.

I grew up in the 70's in Coventry, went to the local comprehensive school and watched 'love thy neighbour' and was subjected to a great deal racism, much of it delivered unwittingly and dare I say without malevolence. I was a wog and occasionally when the pupil was confused a 'nignog' and a plethora of other derogative terms. I was made to feel 'less than' because of my race, my ethnic origin but rarely was it about my being a Muslim except for in that brief interlude when my father decided that I should not be attending an assembly because it was too Christian. My fellow pupils thought I was 'wierd, strange and a 'wally'. My father relented eventually when I convinced him that there were activities in assembly other than religion and that if there was Christian thought going on, I would choose to have pious Muslims ones instead. So for the Lords Prayer (which I quite liked because I liked to think that god could have name like Harold) I would substitute surah Fateha.

Then I went to the local mosque for prayers, I was taught that the local people were infidels, that we should keep clear of them, that their women were little more than harlots and that they lived in an abyss of immorality. ..And this was about people that we lived with. I was aware of an antipathy between the west and Islam. Stories of Muslim Spain, of the greatness of Muslim empires where people were treated ever so much better than in non Muslim empires. That Islam was a special act of kindness to Muslims by a Muslim Allah and that I was specially blessed because I was born a Muslim. The only reason that the West gained its ascendancy was because the Muslims no longer believed truly as the early Muslims did and so the infidels were sent to rule over us as punishment, but that one day we would arise again and rule over the world. I went to Sunday school where I remember I was taught the inevitable superiority of Islam over other religions (lesser faiths), scientific sounding arguments would be advanced to support these superiorities.

Later when I undertook to read a little myself, to read the Quran (of which I not and expert), the Hadith and the history of the collision between the West and Islam, starting from the point that the Arabs burst forth from Arabia and in a very short time managed to carve an extensive empire (a further truth, I was taught, of Islam's special status amongst religions). Therefore when the word Islamophobia gained prominence, to me it was immediately a part of a continuum of antipathy. I understand that there are learned authorities who cite this as a hypothesis too. This antipathy has left residues in the local culture, just count how many Saracen and moors heads; red lions etc grace the entrance to various public houses. The Ottoman Empire the last bastion of Islamic supremacy died in the 14 – 18 conflict.

Subsequently a belief in Muslim cultures, which has much currency, is that the West and especially the Judeo Christian conspiracy has made a calculated onslaught to the Muslim world in an attempt to subjugate and humiliate it. This and much other antipathy resulted in 9/11 . The back lash to perceived insult and injury to the Muslim world. From these events one might believe that there was a festering hatred of all things western in the Muslim world. Now that is my experience of some of the thinking that one might find in certain quarters in both Muslim and Western worlds.

From 9/11 comes a wave of counter hatred, people who look vaguely Muslim including our Sikh brothers have felt the Ire of westerners who in a parody of the some parts of the Muslim world, seem to lump the whole Muslim world as a terrorist camp. I remember in 2008 being a member of a group of people funded by the Government to try and counter a wave of Sikh Muslim mutual

aggression and hatred. Youths were fighting each other. We repaired to Corrymeela, the venue for the Northern Ireland Peace talks and spent several days trying to understand the reason for the antipathy. One of the issues raised by our Sikh brothers was that Sikhs had been attacked mistaken for Muslims and wanted a statement of solidarity . This Islamophobia to some extent still afflicts Sikh/Muslim relations. There is a movement called the Sher – e – Punjab (lions of the Punjab) who have several websites and facebook pages devoted to the explicit hatred of Muslims, they claim that Muslim men are targeting Sikh girls in an attempt to convert them to Islam, in fact a leaflet called Kaur to Khan has been doing its vituperative rounds in the country, stirring up hatred.

So in answer to the question 'does Islamophobia exist?' we can but say yes it most certainly does and not just in the traditional clash of civilisations mode. Of western vs Islamic; but also Sikh vs Muslim. In India the BJP Bharata Janata party, a right wing Hindu nationalist party also inacted a wave of terror against Muslims.

A very valid Muslim response to this would be to argue that these are unfounded hatreds, that the attacks in 9/11 and subsequent events are the work of a very select group of extremists. That the vast majority of Muslims are law abiding citizens who wish to pursue their beliefs in peace and harmony and at no expense to other beliefs. Of course this would be very true and reflects the reality on the ground. There are organisations which are devoted to anti Islamic rhetoric, the EDL comes to mind. Muslims are now feared, sometimes it is not even macro global events that fuel such hatreds. I live in Coventry and frequently visit Birmingham with English and Ethnic friends. Some of my English friends find the overtly 'Islamic' dress in some ways offensive, expecially the Burkha, their contention is that you can maintain modesty and still at least wear some semblance of local dress (trousers, scarves etc). It seems to my English friends that this is an unwillingness to adopt UK as their home, it shows their continued wish not to be identified as citizens of this country.

So what to do about this islamophobia? Well I think that our strategy has to be wide ranging and must address the root of the problem. So education fares very highly in my list. In both the camps of the local populations of western lands and also in the hearts and minds of Muslims from various far flung parts of the globe, especially those who have chosen to make their homes in the Western countries.

The first thing to deal with, is the sponsoring belief that both camps have, the one which says that theirs is not only a good way but the 'Best' way. The problem with having the terms 'Best', 'Chosen people' and most dangerous of all 'chosen people of God/Allah' is that they make all the others 'less than' and at best vague facsimiles of the truth and at worst out and out blasphemies. So when Westerners display the arrogance of belief that theirs is the only Way,   be it catholic, protestant or secular humanism then a clear signal is given to the rest of Humanity that 'you are either with us OR against us'. Similarly when Muslims teach their children about 'infidels; non believers and their own inherent superiority over others in the Mudrassas and mosques of the world, they loosen a powerful force of Antipathy which resonates through the generations...and nothing changes. We continue with the continuum of antipathy and the cycle is revisited. So let us re-examine these interpretations of our various scriptures, and listen to the deeper messages of mutual tolerance,

compassion and equal validity of belief. This must be done through our organs of education, in the teacher training colleges western universities and the Ulema training institutions of the Muslim world. We must regulate ourselves effectively and guard against over zealous and antipathetic interpretations of our various teachings. We must take those to task in our own communities when extremist views are propounded whether they are by the EDL/Sher-e-Panjab/Al Muhajiroon or Al Qaeda.

We must have a fair media, maybe regulated by an external body, appointed by Parliament (in this country, and similar organs of state in others) who ensures that the Media cannot victimise specific groups of people in search of sensationalism and increased circulation figures. So when crime is committed by a person who is of Muslim origin, his/her Muslimness is not somehow linked with the crime.

Certainly when there are public debates then caste a wider net and instead of having the spokespersons of vocal minorities turn up to, unrepresentatively, speak for all Muslims/Sikhs etc/ invite those who are not extremists to speak. The challenge may well be to find people from the mainstream who will stand up and speak. It is dangerous to challenge extremist views, they tend to display their negotiating abilities through the sights of a gun.

To summarise, then, Islamophobia does exist, and not just in the east meets west sense. That it has come about because of history and current developments, some very poor decisions made by western governments, and mutually exclusivist ideologies which may be elitist and separatist. The way to counter these is an examination of extremist views and self regulation in our various groups.

Thank you