

# Religion in the Public Square: a Muslim Perspective

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While much of the commentary preceding and subsequent to Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the UK focused on the camps Christian and 'aggressive secularist', Muslim reactions to the speeches delivered during his stay have been probed less closely. It's not that Muslims and the role of Islam in Britain's public square is of lesser concern to the Catholic community. Dr Azzam of the Prince's School of Traditional Arts was invited by the Catholic Bishops Conference in England and Wales to follow the speech of Lord Jonathan Sacks with reflections of his own at the Pope's meeting with faith leaders in the UK held at St Mary's in Twickenham ahead of the Papal address in Westminster.

Interfaith dialogue and interfaith relations are often seen as little more than men in beards conversing with men in hats (and they are almost invariably men), but Pope Benedict's ruminations on the necessary interaction and interpenetration of the 'world of reason' and the 'world of faith'; on the 'legitimate role of religion in the public square'; on the 'ethical foundations' that inform our political choices and our search for a moral consensus that animates our pluralist political society, and of course, of the right of the faithful to act in accordance with their conscience – in all of these the Pope will have found a willing Muslim audience lending an attentive ear.

Perhaps in no other section of society today has the Durkheimian instrumentalisation of religion in society been more pervasive than in relation to British Muslims in recent years. It often feels that Islam in Britain is treated and viewed less as a religion informing the spiritual yearnings of individuals submitting to One God and abiding by the prophetic example of Muhammad, the seal of the prophets, than as an instrument through which Governments might attain the desired level of social cohesion – whatever that may be and however it may be measured.

Pope Benedict's meditation on questions that draw us to examine the world around us and ask ourselves 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' and how are we to be witnesses to the Truth in the world, much as we hold to the Truth of the Transcendent and the Afterlife in our personal lives, echo Islamic teachings on critical inquiry of the world we inhabit to better understand our purpose and our Creator, as well as the moral agency we all embody as vicegerents on earth.

And yet the moral agency of the faithful and its affirmation in the public square are increasingly the target of the 'atheist extremism' or militant secularism against which the faithful battle in our world of human rights and equality legislation.

'What is owed to Caesar and what is owed to God' is not resolved by the neat relegation of religion into the private sphere. Moral agency is something the faithful carry with them into the public square, a 'mighty force for good' which acts to the great benefit of believers and non-believers alike. Coming to terms with this moral agency and the ethical foundations it constructs for the dialogical exchanges between the faithful and political societies they inhabit, and the faithful of different religions together, is a process engulfed in agonising deliberation and misunderstanding. The faithful are usually cast as minorities bearing hegemonic designs. Of this British Muslims are well aware. Few are the days that pass when Muslims are not portrayed in the media as 'forcing' concessions and accommodations on the rest of British society.

Yet the pressing question facing all religions in the UK, not just the Catholic community, is the conversation in our Big Society on the role religion ought to enjoy in the public square by virtue of it being a fundamental human right of citizens to freedom of religion and freedom of association.

Our idea of the public square, of the populace intermingling secure in their citizenship and fundamental rights, are being radically reshaped as the worlds of faith and reason navigate difficult terrains bringing the established secular ethos into contact with a religious resurgence – and not just of a Christian character.

But if the public square is the place we celebrate our fundamental rights and the citizenship of all – a society of equals living together - so it is the place that as citizens we comfortably express our views and exercise our moral agency, religious and otherwise. To relegate religion to the private sphere does not resolve the tensions and challenges arising from our different lifestyle choices. Nor does it allow for transparency and openness in our encounters as citizens of different religious traditions and moral universes.

If the great achievement of our evolved political societies, with our constitutions and checks and balances, is the construction of 'civil' society so then does it behoove us to be civil in the public square, accepting of freedom of religion as we are accepting of other freedoms. To do differently is to discriminate against believers.

It was a point made by Pope Benedict that the British media reported widely. And just on the media and its privileged role in this process, the Pope said, '...because their opinions reach such a wide audience, the British media have a graver responsibility than most and a greater opportunity to promote the peace of nations....' - an observation with which many British Muslims will concur particularly in regards to the more irresponsible sections of the British media.

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