

EDITORIAL

Imam Training in the UK

The growing fear of fundamentalism has led governments across Western Europe to consider plans to promote loyalty and moderation in their Muslim citizens. One of the ambitious plans of the British government is to train imams. It is hoped that this will create imams who have an awareness of British culture and a good command of the English language. Thus, through the delivery of their Friday sermons, occasional lectures and pastoral care of the young people, these imams will play a major role in helping them integrate into British society. In turn, this will not only dissuade them from falling into the hands of the terrorists, but will also inspire them to resist such groups. The current feeling of both the government and some Muslims is that imams who have come to Britain from abroad contribute to the alienation that some Muslims experience: what the imams have to say has little or no relevance to the lives of young British Muslims; some sermons are considered to be direct incitement of hatred towards the West. It is hoped that with the introduction of homegrown imams, this problem will be solved.

The assumption behind this move is that it is the imams from abroad who are responsible for creating fundamentalist sentiment amongst the younger generation of British Muslims or alienating them from the mainstream society by inculcating in them a culture which does not belong to this land. It is hoped that the introduction of homegrown imams will prevent fundamentalism from abroad from seeping into the country. Figures such as the imam of Finsbury Park, Abu Hamza, are often used to support claims that government oversight of some sort is necessary in order to stop fundamentalism from taking root in British soil, but it is important to bear in mind that cases such as Abu Hamza are rare. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that homegrown imams, who will be taught a version of “moderate Islam”, will not become fundamentalists themselves, or that they will not incite fundamentalist behaviour in their community.

How correct is the assumption that the cause of alienation of young British Muslims is the lack of good sermons? On the one hand it is claimed that the imported imams who speak Urdu or Gujrati, for example, cannot communicate with the British young, but on the other hand it is alleged that through their fiery preaching they manage to ignite in their audience a passion for martyrdom. One wonders, how these imams achieve such objectives if they cannot communicate with the young people. In any case, out of 1.5 million British Muslims, how many have actually turned into terrorists? On the other hand, if we look at some other parts of the world, where both young people and imams are conversant with the local culture as well as the language, terrorism continues unabated. We need to read into the minds of these people and try to understand the dynamics of their society. The questions that should be asked are why they are carrying out violent acts in the name of a religion that does not approve

of such acts and why they are successful in spreading their message beyond the boundaries of their own country and convince some young people abroad. It is too simplistic to think that such complex problems can be solved by imams delivering the certain types of sermons in the mosque.

If the British government wishes to stop fundamentalism on its own grounds, then it must look elsewhere: its policy both at home and abroad. Poor religious education in British school has, in many ways, failed to create religious sensibilities in our young people. They suffer from a lack uncertainty and confusion vis a vis the purpose of life and the way to live it because the understanding of their faith is not anchored on universal principles enunciated in world scriptures. Unfortunately, religious ignorance is entrenched in our society. With the loss of centrality of religion in human life, ideas seemingly religious can easily sway one from the true path of religion. The current secular way of teaching religious education does not do justice to the subject. The thematic approach loses the integrity of a religion and thus fails to bring out its essential teachings and how they cohere in the larger scheme of life. Religious education becomes a channel for passing disjointed information about religion; the result is pupils who fail to appreciate the wholeness of a religion and therefore do not learn what it means to be a religious person. This kind of approach is not unique to the teaching of Islam.

Another factor beside religious education is the negative portrayal of Islam in the media. Media representations of Islam as a violent religion are as responsible for alienation of young Muslims as poor imam-ship. As Edward Said has said, “negative images of Islam continue to be very much more prevalent than any others, and [...] such images correspond not to what Islam ‘is’ [...], but to what prominent sectors of a particular society take it to be. Those sectors have the power and the will to propagate *that* particular image of Islam, and this image therefore becomes more prevalent, more present, than all others.” As these negative images of Islam are forced onto people through a powerful media system, many young Muslims become confused, many disillusioned and many others enraged. Apart from this, the government policy in the Middle East has utterly failed to gain the confidence of Muslims who have been forced to change their attitude towards the West. The situation is made worse by educational under-achievement of Muslim pupils, unemployment of young people, the general economic condition of Muslims, as well as racial discrimination at different levels. Are our imams going to address these problems?

There are a number of issues surrounding the training of imams. For example, what images of Islam are these imams going to propagate? Are they compatible with the Muslim consciousness? What is going to be on the syllabus of the imam-training course, and who is going to teach them? In what way will this syllabus be different from what is taught at madrasahs? Should we train the imams educated abroad or those who are educated in this country? What kind of issues are these imams going to address after their training? What will prevent them from discussing day-to-day matters pertaining to our society, which have religious implications? Or, must they deliver only ‘harmless’ spiritual sermons (*khutbahs*) aimed at the inner purification of people? Is there a guarantee that their sermons that deal with moral and ethical issues will not clash with the guidelines they might have been given? Above all, what kind of sermon (*khutbah*) or advice will make sense to our young people who are born and brought up in this country?

Clearly, a lot of thinking is needed. If this initiative is marred by a lack of clear objectives, whether due to naiveté and inexperience in dealing with our new situation, or due to a wrong perception of the cause of the problem, the outcome will be counterproductive. It should be clear in the minds of the policy makers and course designers whether the objectives are to help our young Muslims interact with the British society as responsible law-abiding citizens or to counteract the terrorism which is one of the most complex phenomena of our time. The debate over how far the government should intervene in or control the teaching of imams arises: for many Muslims in Britain, the idea that Islam is being filtered through a non-Muslim government (or a Muslim government for that matter) before it comes to the mosque is both disturbing and frightening.

One wonders what the next steps of the government will be if these initiatives fail to stop the increasing number of terrorist attacks. In some countries in the Middle East, imams have no control over what they preach: they must prepare the sermons (*khuṭbahs*) in accordance with the government's strict guidelines or they are required to merely read out sermons that are prepared for them. Although the government's attempt is nowhere near this kind of situation, what is currently being suggested might be perceived as a lesser form of the loss of freedom of expression. Are the trained imams going simply to follow certain guidelines or they will have the freedom to present Islam as a religion that has guided the lives of millions of people over the centuries?

However, there are members of the Muslim community and Muslim bodies who have also expressed concern over the number of Muslim imams who have been trained abroad and brought into the UK either for temporary periods of time or permanently. The parents' contention is that these imams do not have the necessary skills to guide their children and communicate to them the teachings of Islam. The problem is not limited to the sole issue of language. Quite often the contents of the sermons (*khuṭbahs*) are of little relevance to our contemporary situations. Using some favoured topics of a certain nature and expressed through certain idioms and phrases, these sermons can motivate the older generations, who understand the language, to come to understand the realities of the next life but there is little attempt to relate the Islamic teachings to our everyday life. Although many mosque schools have developed syllabuses that address the issues pertaining to both the present life and the next, and adopted a modern way of teaching, there are many mosque schools, which simply follow the syllabus taught in the subcontinent.

If the syllabus of the imam-training course is properly devised, and they are taught by trained and knowledgeable teachers, it will benefit both the Muslims and non-Muslims of this country. Such a course must not lose sight of the need to inculcate in Muslims the essential teachings of Islam, and must not sacrifice the dearly held convictions of Muslims in order to suit contingent circumstances. If these imams are able to convey the correct message Islam as understood by our pious scholars, whose lives are examples to be emulated, they will gain the confidence and trust of our young and old alike. This will help create a generation of people who will grow with the true faith of Islam and behave as responsible members of our society. This will ensure peace and justice for all.

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