

Speech to the National Imams and Rabbis Conference

26th March 2007 Manchester

Rt. Hon. Hazel Blears MP

'Building Alliances, Respecting Differences'

[check against delivery]

THANK YOU, and let me start by praising this initiative of bringing together Rabbis, Imams, youth leaders, community champions, and other people of Faith, to discuss common causes and complaints, and to create common solutions and mutual understanding. And let me add my thanks to those of John Battle MP for the work that you do.

It is important to recognise that the different strands of opinion and differing traditions within both Judaism and Islam are mostly represented here today. Jews from the different branches of Judaism, orthodox, liberal, reform and so on, and Muslims from different branches of Islam all here together.

As someone who went to Methodist Sunday School, and married a Roman Catholic, I know there is often as much to learn from within religions as between them.

It seems to me that for all the talk about British society becoming more secular, more consumerist, more avaricious, actually we have seen a growth in the importance of faith in many of our communities. It may well be that Church of England attendances are down, but other religions are not necessarily facing the same issues. It is interesting to note that Polish, and other recent arrivals into the UK, are swelling the congregations of some Roman Catholic churches, especially in the cities.

Of course, there is a direct link between the changing pattern of faith in Britain and immigration.

I often reflect that the Manchester Jewish Museum, built as a synagogue on Cheetham Hill Road in 1874 to serve the local Spanish and Portuguese Jewish communities, has long since seen its Jewish population move further north, whilst that area of Manchester is now home to many Muslim families.

Waves of immigration spread out around cities, influencing the architecture, culture and history of the neighbourhoods.

We have also seen a growth in what we might call 'active faith' – people of faith putting their values, and the teachings of their scriptures, into practical effect in their communities.

I think of the spread of faith-based schools, and the fierce competition amongst parents to get their children into them. We've heard last week the call by the Chancellor for more Academies, which opens the door to more faith-based involvement in education. I've always been pleased to support local faith schools in my own constituency of Salford.

I think too of the increasing role of faith-based organisations in delivering community support and local services, for example housing associations. I welcome this phenomenon. I've read and enjoyed Steve Chalke's book 1000 Ways to Transform Your Community, which highlights the Christian contribution to community regeneration and renewal, and I know there are comparable examples from the Muslim and Jewish communities.

I have never believed that the state should do everything. I believe that local communities should own and direct their local services, for it is here that you find the problem-solving genius and inspirational leadership, rather than in central government.

In the wake of a tragedy, such as the shocking shootings and stabbings in London and Manchester in recent weeks, it is the faith groups who step in, bringing people together and providing community support.

I do not think that the state should be totally replaced by charities and voluntary organisations. It does mean that more power can and should be passed to local communities, within a framework of support, funding and minimum standards.

As well as these positive aspects and attributes of faith communities in the UK, we must also recognise the issues and problems that confront us. There are those who want to stir up animosity and hatred. Those who want to play up myths, stereotypes and prejudice.

Both Jews and Muslims have for centuries had to contend with and confront those who wish to distort and subvert the true meanings of their religions, to drive communities apart, to create chaos and violence. Within all religions are extremists who are willing to fall into the trap, to play up to the stereotypes and play into the hands of those who want to undermine their religion.

I pay tribute to all of the faith leaders in all religions who stand up to the extremists, who show through the true teachings of the Bible, Koran and Torah that religious faith is about peace, respect for others, love of family and community, and about the basic laws that allow humans to live together.

It is through inter-faith dialogue and learning that true respect can be forged.

Many Christians are simply unaware that the Koran reveres Jesus as a prophet. Many Jews, Muslims and Christians are unaware of the rich Abrahamic heritage we share in common. A study of other people's religions is a prerequisite for a greater understanding of one's own.

There has been much discussion about the tensions between religions, races and ethnic groups. But I believe that Britain is an exemplar of how a multi-faith, multi-ethnic nation can work in practice. We are an immeasurably richer country for the contribution of people arriving here, often in search of a better life.

If someone comes to a new country, it is usually to build a better life, and to inject renewed aspiration and pursuit of success into the national bloodstream. You can see this from the emphasis on education amongst so many immigrant communities.

Our experience of immigration has been positive.

Of course, I do not deny the pernicious influence of racism, islamophobia and anti-semitism. I know that many families have suffered at the hands of racist bullies and thugs.

But Britain remains a fair, tolerant country, where communities respect one another and people live in peace.

That success is anchored in a simple approach: we respect religious differences, but are united in a transcendent belief in democracy, human rights and the rule of law. No religion should face persecution or prohibition by the state. But no individual citizen should face barriers or discrimination within their religion either. We have a right to religious freedom, and we all have a right to other freedoms too, including free expression, but not at the expense of other people's rights and freedoms.

I am especially glad that the role of women is under discussion later today, and issues such as forced marriages, and the role of girls and women within our communities and religious organisations will form part of our ongoing deliberations as well.

The Women's Conference to be held later this week is a good example of how this dialogue has become more inclusive of the wider community. I know that Meg Munn, Deputy Minister for Women and Equalities, who will be addressing the Women's Conference, is keen to hear the experiences and views of the Muslim and Jewish women contributing to the discussions.

The Government sees this conference and the women's conference as being the next step towards establishing a nationally recognised framework for interfaith dialogue and co-operation between the Muslim and Jewish communities.

Those discussions should be widened out into a debate about how we make the democratic process more accessible, about how our political system can adapt to the changing ethnic and faith make-up of Britain, and how we ensure that mainstream democratic politics is seen as the answer to everyone's problems and issues, not just an elite.

Tolerance. Family. Respect. Social Action. Care for the vulnerable and weak.

These are Jewish values.

These are Islamic values.

These are British values.

And they are human values.

As the Prime Minister said recently, in a speech about integration and immigration, we need to:

“worship God in our own way, take pride in our different cultures after our own fashion, respect our distinctive histories according to our own traditions; but do so within a shared space of shared values in which we take no less pride and show no less respect. The right to be different. The duty to integrate. That is what being British means. And neither racists nor extremists should be allowed to destroy it.”

Thank you for all that you do, and good luck for the rest of the conference.