

In the Name of Allah, the All Merciful, the Most Merciful

And may Allah bless Muhammad and his family and companions and grant them peace.

## **Letter to a New Muslim**

Allah, exalted is He, says that whose meaning is:

*Who could say anything better*

*than someone who summons to Allah*

*and acts rightly*

*and says, 'I am one of the Muslims'?* (Surah Fussilat: 33)

You have accepted Islam. You have realised that you have a Lord Who created you, and Who has decreed your destiny, both the good and the bad of it, the sweet and the sour of it, Who hears your prayers, Who knows you well – for does He not know what He created? – Who guides you and has guided you to Islam, Who is Generous, Merciful and Powerful, Swift to take reckoning, and Who has both beautiful and majestic attributes. You realise that your Merciful Lord sent messages to you personally by means of His messengers, the last of whom was the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, Muhammad. You believe that the Book of Allah is the Speech of Allah, speaking to you.

You are probably stunned that your culture concealed the truth of Islam for more than a thousand years, and lied about it to you and to your ancestors. You have been overwhelmed to find that Allah is the Truth, the Real, that the Garden and the Fire are true, that countless prophets and messengers have been sent to mankind including 'Isa (Jesus), Musa (Moses), Ibrahim (Abraham), Nuh (Noah) and Adam, and many more whose names you do not know, in all corners of the earth throughout history, peace be upon all of them, and that now you live in the time of the last prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, whose message abrogates all other messages and whose way of life, Islam, is for all mankind of every race and language until the end of time.

You belong to a community that extends eastward from China to western Europe, and into the Americas, south to the southern tip of Africa, and north to cold Asiatic lands. It is a community that blends Arabs, Turks, Persians, Chinese, Africans, Malays and Indonesians, Indians and Pakistanis, and increasing numbers of Germans, Spanish, English and Italians, and Mayans, Incas, Guyanans and Caribbeans. This community is more than a

quarter of all humanity.

You are probably aware of the amazing wealth and beauty of the architecture, workmanship and craftsmanship of Muslim life, the great corpus of poetry and song, and the huge cultural heritage of scholarship on the sciences of Islam, commentary on the Qur'an, elaboration of the law in a most sophisticated manner, studies of the hadith literature, and dictionaries of the Arabic language, etc.

However, in the midst of all of this, you are also struck by the fact that you are not only a new Muslim, but are considered to be a 'revert' or a 'convert', and are expected to qualify that further, by all manner of people, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and to become: Sunni, Sufi, *salafi*, Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, or to adhere to 'Traditional Islam', or political Islam, become a 'moderate' Muslim or be regarded as a fundamentalist or extremist. But you have simply accepted Islam and are content to be a Muslim. You are probably perplexed that membership of these sub-divisions also seems necessarily to place you in a position of opposition to others, sometimes with an actual dislike verging on hatred, or with a slight antipathy, or, as in the case of the legal schools, with a courtesy which you suspect masks a deeper hostility.

You also see and sometimes intuit that there are those who see 'the West' as utterly opposed to Islam and who are thus themselves explicitly in opposition to it and yet others who are intent on imitating 'the West' in every possible way and see no other way forward for Islam than in such imitation.

So this is a puzzle, but as a new Muslim, you may feel yourself not in a position to hold to your original intuition that Islam itself is enough and that you are simply a Muslim. It is the purpose of this open letter to try to convince you that it is indeed more than enough simply to be a Muslim. But I would also like to show that the groupings to which you are being called, and the labels being used all have some substance to them and to persuade you that there is also a reality in belonging to these groups and that they are all Muslims and part of the greater Muslim community. Nevertheless the great secret is to remain simply a Muslim. Perhaps you are beginning to realise that this is something whose meaning we do not completely know and needs to be reclaimed.

But where to start? First of all, I will limit myself to matters in which different groups of Muslims are right in what they adhere to because they are things that all the Muslims agree upon without entering into areas on which there

is disagreement. In this I will ask your patience, because we must tackle some demanding concepts and really try to get to grips with some of the ideas at work here.

Let us start with political Islam, and let us for that purpose take the much maligned Hizb at-Tahrir. Although there are other groups who place emphasis on the political aspects of Islam, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, we will take this one group since they are in the headlines at present. The truth is that the Hizb have taken hold of one of the important threads of Islam, the issue of governance.

Allah says that whose meaning is:

*You who have iman! obey Allah and obey the Messenger  
and those in command among you.*

(Surat an-Nisa': 58)

The third group mentioned in this verse, '*those in command among you*', according to the majority of the people of knowledge, are the rulers and leaders of the Muslims, and the Companions of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, agreed unanimously on the election of a caliph.

Much of the *Shari'ah* cannot be put into effect without a ruler, or a *qadi* appointed by a ruler, and there is no doubt that caliphate is the traditional expression of Muslim governance, although we must also be clear that we are grossly over-simplifying our history since even a cursory glance at it reveals all sorts of counter-Caliphates, sultanates, kingdoms and Amirates throughout the last near millennium and a half. Yet all of these forms can clearly be comprised under the heading of communities under the leadership of '*those in command among you*'.

Indeed, governance is built into much of Islam. For example, *zakah* is collected by men appointed by the ruler and is distributed by them. The ruler must decide the beginning and end of Ramadan. He appoints imams of the major mosques, and he appoints regulators (*muhtasibs*) who keep the market free of usury and make sure that the weights and measures are just. He is the one who will decide whether or not the Muslims under his care are at war or not, something that may not be decided by groups of fighters in the mountains or guerrillas hiding in the cities. So the Hizb are quite right in that there is no real way to separate the religion of Islam from politics, and the politics of Islam is quite clearly there in the Book and the Sunnah.

The Hizb are also one group representing the trend called 'modernism',

which, if stated as our need to grapple with the modern age, then the case is inarguable. Indeed, we could argue that it is the essential characteristic of Islam that it is destined to be fit for every age and every society until the end of time. Not only does the law of Islam contain specific timeless rulings, but it contains within itself procedures to meet every new situation and to bring answers to new questions on the basis of what we already have of verses of the Qur'an, known Sunnahs, the consensus of the people of knowledge and previous judgements.

That is simply in the legal sense, but Islam is always modern, or rather let us say that it is 'new', and if not, something has gone wrong. It is not new because of the impact of external cultures; but because it is new it subjects each age to its higher evaluation and retains what is acceptable and rejects what is unacceptable. The modernism that says that we must revise or reform Islam on the basis of what we understand from science or other contemporary institutions is already out of date, since the science they elevate is already under intense scrutiny from within its own citadel and in serious crisis. Such people yearn for the precise mechanical order of Newton which has already been swept away by the uncertainties of the quantum order.

Islam has always been new. The first appearance of Islam was new, and in the words of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, it was a stranger. He said:

"Islam began as a stranger and it will come again as a stranger as it began, so fragrant good fortune for the strangers." This hadith is narrated by Abu Hurayrah, may Allah be pleased with him and is included in the collection of *Sahih Muslim* among others.

The great Andalusian civilisation was completely new. The arrival of the Ottomans was completely new. Each civilisation of Islam has been new.

After political Islam and modernism, let us take a look at forms of Islam that emphasis tradition; let us look at the *salafis* or as they are sometimes known derogatorily the *wahhabis*. They place emphasis on the practice of the *salaf*: the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and the right-acting first generations, and in that they are quite correct. Abu Nahih al-'Irbad ibn Sariyah, may Allah be pleased with him, is reported to have said, "The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, admonished us with an admonition by which the hearts became frightened and the eyes flowed with tears, so we said, 'Messenger of Allah, it is as if it were a farewell admonition, so advise us.' He said, 'I advise you to have *taqwa*<sup>1</sup> of

<sup>1</sup> *Taqwa* is behaviour arising from fearful awareness of Allah, i.e. avoidance of everything He

Allah, mighty is He and majestic, and to hear and obey even if a slave is given command over you.<sup>2</sup> Whoever of you lives will see many disagreements, so you must take hold of my Sunnah and the Sunnah of the rightly guided<sup>3</sup> caliphs who take the right way<sup>4</sup>. Bite on it with the molar teeth. Beware of newly introduced matters, for every newly introduced matter is an innovation, and every innovation is a going astray, and every straying is in the Fire.” Abu Dawud and at-Tirmidhi narrated it and [at-Tirmidhi] said, “A good sahih hadith.” And Imam an-Nawawi discerningly included it in his selection of those forty hadith about which the people of knowledge agree that they are indispensable. This well known hadith is one of very many that make clear that one must hold to the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and to the Sunnah of the caliphs who took the right way. So the *salafi* insistence on this is not something new and is not something that was lost, but rather it is and has always been a matter of agreement among the Muslims, and indeed there are too many verses of the Qur’an and traditions of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, on this matter for there to be any doubt about it.

There are similar groups whose orientation one might say is towards tradition and the past and carefully preserving the sources of Islam, and who can argue with them about the importance of that?

Then let us take a glance at those who place more stress on the spiritual aspect of Islam. For the sufis, in the preliminary stages Sufism consists of purification of the heart and one’s behaviour from destructive traits such as showing-off, envy, miserliness, greed, anger and hatred and then the embodiment of the noble qualities of character such as generosity, forbearance, steadfastness, and vigilance, etc. They aspire to a true and direct knowledge (*ma’rifah*) of Allah, exalted is He, quite unlike the knowledge acquired from books or from study, although not contradicting that necessary scholarly knowledge. Very many of the people of knowledge take the position that its sciences are obligatory for every single Muslim man and woman. That is because there are numerous verses of the Qur’an and hadith of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, showing the importance of authentic knowledge of Him and that the negative qualities of character are fatal and that the noble qualities of character are of the very essence of and His Messenger, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, have prohibited and obedience to everything they have commanded.

<sup>2</sup> Another ringing endorsement of the importance of leadership.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Mahdiyyun’ means ‘rightly guided’.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Rashidin’ which I have translated as ‘who took the right way’ is often mistranslated as ‘rightly guided’ which has a passive sense, whereas it has an active meaning.

what the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, was sent for. He, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, is narrated to have said:

“I was only sent to perfect the noble generous qualities of character.” This is narrated by Imam al-Bukhari and by a number of other eminent hadith scholars, and is only one out of numerous texts which stress the importance of this point.

Some Muslims agree on this but differ about terminology, so that rather than talking about Sufism, they talk about ‘purification of the self’ (*tazkiyat an-nafs*). Taking that into account, and since both groups agree on the essence of the matter, only differing about terminology, it is clear that the Muslims are unanimous on the importance of this science.

But if someone thought that because of the spiritual and inner dimensions of Islam one could dispense with the outward aspects of it, or if he believed in an inner interpretation that negated the clear outward meanings, it would be a corruption of Islam. Rather, Sufism is an important and significant aspect of our way whose importance only becomes clearer in the context of the traditional sources and politics, i.e. it is a part of a whole.

Now let us turn to terms such as ‘traditional Islam’ – which is a modern coinage – or ‘Sunni’ Islam, both used for a similar purpose which we might refer to as belonging to *Ahl as-sunnah wa al-jama’ah* ‘the people of the Sunnah and the community (*jama’ah*)’. This was a term that was coined to cover different groups within the Muslim community, which, although differing in some points of practice and doctrine, are considered to stay within the acceptable parameters of Islam: that is those who adhere to the four legal schools – the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i and Hanbali, to the two schools of *‘aqidah* – the Maturidi and the Ash’ari and to the school of Sufism that derives from Imam al-Junayd, which is the Sufism whose proofs are from the Book of Allah and the Sunnah. So this umbrella is used to cover a number of different positions that Muslims have adopted, admitting that they are acceptable even though there are differences between them.

Here it is important to remember that the people covered by this term are Muslims, not merely Sunnis or even ‘Sunni’ Muslims, for to talk of ‘Sunni’ Muslims almost suggests that there is another acceptable type of Islam, which is not the case.

Although Muslims follow the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi’i or Hanbali schools, which are themselves comprised within the body known as the People of

the Sunnah and the Community, they ought not to be defined by them, i.e. one may follow the *madhhab* of Abu Hanifah, for example, but one is not a Hanafi Muslim, but a Muslim. Moreover, the truth is that the vast majority of Muslims do not, properly speaking, have a *madhhab* at all. The ruler of a society must choose someone to act as *qadi* and *mufti* and they must necessarily follow the fiqh of one of the well known imams, since they will never reach the level of being able to derive judgements from the Qur'an and the Sunnah by themselves, and this is the consensus of the people of knowledge. The Muslim will ask the *mufti* or imam for the answers to various problems and issues, and the answer he receives will be according to one of these well known schools, but he still remains a Muslim and not defined by the school of his *mufti* or imam. In that sense, *madhhabism* is a corruption, although the *madhhabs* themselves are all acceptable. So, incidentally, we are again pointed to the importance of leadership, since leaders determine the path taken in these matters.

All of the above is about groups within the fold of Islam. It is necessary to address the matter of one of the groups outside of the acceptable parameters of Islam: the Shi'ah. This term covers a wide range of groups some of whom, such as the Ismailis, are clearly doctrinally so far from Islam as to be non-Muslims, or have doctrines containing elements that remove them from Islam, such as those who declare all of the Companions, may Allah be pleased with them all, to be unbelievers. The main body of the Shi'ah are beyond the bounds acceptable in Islam, but one hesitates to issue a blanket condemnation of them since unnecessary accusations of *kufir* are abhorrent. If we were to look for merit in them, we would say that it is love of the family of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, such as 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and his wife and descendants, may Allah be pleased with them. Respect and love for the family of the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, is something of high importance in Islam, and is ordinarily to be found among Muslims. There are many proofs of its importance in the Book of Allah and the Sunnah, the most immediate of which is the fact that the very prayer we perform five times a day concludes with the famous *du'a*, "O Allah, bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad as you blessed Ibrahim and the family of Ibrahim..." However, we do not let the undoubted merit of Sayyiduna 'Ali, may Allah be pleased with him, blind us to the equally evident high standing of the other great Companions, which is documented in the Qur'an itself and in numerous uncontested hadith.

Now we turn to our theme of Islam and the West. Although we are not blind to the machinations of imperial and colonial powers in the past and present, we are loathe to view the West as a monolithic entity implacably opposed to Islam, particularly since we ourselves are its fruit. A careful study of European history, in my view, shows that the West has been making its way towards Islam for a very long time. In that, it has been thwarted by vested interests, such as the church and usury finance, which feel threatened by Islam. But a deep reading of our history shows that we have been moving beyond the imperial Roman heritage and the falsifications of doctrine and religion that the churches foisted on us, and the only logical place for the West to go is Islam. A proof of that is the very fact that a talk such as this is needed for the great numbers of people entering Islam here in the UK.

In that context, I would like to return to speaking to you about your position in this.

Do not in the midst of all this succumb, may Allah protect you and me, to the disappointment and disillusionment that has set in for others in similar situations, when after the initial excitement over the discovery of this great hidden treasure of Islam they found out that many Muslims and Muslim communities fail quite seriously to live up to it. They slowly drifted away from mosques dominated by their own ethnic divisions and quarrels. They rarely go right out of Islam, but the enthusiasm has gone, and at best, their Islam became a habit, a religion. That disillusionment is impossible if you see yourself as responsible, along with your brothers and sisters, for bringing about Islam in our time in these lands. You will have no time for disappointment and depression then.

We have summed up in a very cursory way some things about the different Muslim groups that exist, trying to show that each one has something of value and something true in what it adheres to. Indeed, even in their grouping together under leaders and working together to establish what they believe to be true, there is also a valuable point, for the group is an attempt to do what we should be doing which is to bring about community. Even though we habitually consider such groupings divisive, yet the truth is that forming a community and obeying leaders is closer to the way of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and the Companions than living as isolated families and individuals in a secular state. That such groups ought to become communities and ought naturally to extend a welcome to all Muslims and to regard all Muslims as their brothers and sisters and to naturally come to coalesce with each other to form larger communities

capable of being considered societies, we consider obvious. So it is really time for the Muslims at large to learn from these matters and to begin to come together in communities under freely chosen leaders, and to put into effect whatever of Islam we are able in our lives here and now, most importantly the fallen pillar of *zakah*.

But I would like again to speak to you who have become a Muslim in this society at this time. Your place is very important. It is vital that you take the middle way of Islam, and I do not mean a way of compromise, but a way of balance. It is important that you become a Muslim in Britain rather than a 'British Muslim', because we are tired of all adjectives qualifying Islam. It is important that you subject British life to the values of Islam rather than trying to reform Islam according to British values. In that, you should also resist the pressure on you from your brother and sister Muslims to modify Islam in the other direction, i.e. to bring Arabic and Pakistani cultural elements into your Islam. Islam will spread here when it is clear that one does not cease to be British by becoming a Muslim, for Islam is not a culture but a filter for culture, with the unique challenge in this time of filtering the anti-culture of presentism that engages modern man today. Modern culture is against culture.

In this endeavour, your maintaining good relations with your parents and family, your old friends and acquaintances, your work colleagues and fellow students, is something so important that it is hard to over-stress. How much of Islam consists of good character and behaviour, generosity, courtesy and kindness! In the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, we have a good model. As indigenous Muslims you have an access to people in these islands. It may be enough that they simply know that you are a Muslim, if your conduct is in harmony with his, may Allah bless him and grant him peace. You are actually engaged in a historic event even if history does not record your name. So you have a double responsibility: you have the responsibility of maintaining a good opinion of and showing good behaviour to all Muslims, whatever groups they belong to, and you have the responsibility of being a forerunner of the Islamic society that is sure to come in these lands.

In that there is no avoiding the need for one core element of the message of Islam, which is so obvious that, even though, along with leadership, it is one of the threads of our letter to you, it is almost never stated explicitly in the literature: community. The Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and his Companions were a community. That is evident in the entire

hadith literature. And if we link back to what we have talked about, it is the need for community that drives people to create and belong to groups.

Needless to say, a chilly mosque in which people come and go without meeting each other and without any care for each other's well-being does not fulfil that requirement, and is certainly not based on the model of the Illuminated Madinah which our beloved Messenger, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, established.

In the prayer we make five times a day, and the Fatihah we recite, we ask Allah to "*Guide us on the straight path,*" asking Him for 'us', with no qualification of gender, race or culture, and not only for 'me'. It is assumed at the most fundamental level of Islam that we are in community.

The one adjective qualifying our status in Islam that we have not refused is 'new', for if there is anything that a new age requires it is a new Muslim. And as we have stressed the importance of community, we must also add that the new Muslim will necessarily be in new communities.

But, what is community? This is a question worth asking, for it is easy to assume that we know what it means, but this is by no means clear. This word has received a great deal of mystification.

For an answer let us turn to the meaning of the word. We first of all find that it links in its etymology to the word 'common', i.e. what is common to a group of people. In its most extreme form everything is held in common, to the extent that men and women hold each other in common and there is no recognisable form of marriage. This is the extreme idealistic form of communism. It is there in Plato's *Republic*. At the other extreme we have virtual communities, members of Facebook. People who use the same type of computer are considered to be communities. We are in community with people on the other side of the earth whom we have never met and never will, because we share an interest in some form of music. So relatively trivial things that people have in common are considered to make them communities, even to the extent of them suffering some rare syndrome. We posit that people are communities with respect to trivial matters, because they are not allowed to be communities in what really matters, and a great deal of what really matters is those things that are to do with money, property and wealth. The great undiscovered aspect of Islam is those matters that are to do with money and property, the most significant part of which for us is the fallen pillar of *zakat*, which we hope that Hajj Abdalhaqq Bewley will treat later today.

Humanism treats the essential thing that we have in common to be our humanity, but since Stalin, Genghis Khan and the serial killer can all claim that, it is not a particularly useful definition.

We say, and Allah knows best, that one of the key matters we have in common is our need. This is not merely need of things but our deep need of the Creator who brought us into being and sustains us in being at each instant. That need also manifests as our need of each other and our interconnectedness. Allah said:

Mankind! you are the poor in need of Allah

whereas Allah is the Rich Beyond Need, the Praiseworthy. (Surah Fatir: 15)

Humanity divide into two with respect to this need: those who acknowledge it and those who deny it. They are two communities and have always been so throughout history.

We also realise that it links to words such as commune and communicate. Commune is still used as a noun for a unit of urban government in Europe, but as a verb it is a particularly intense and intimate version of communicate. So let us dare the thought that community, as well as being a people who hold some things in common, is something in which communication takes place. Communication, as between human beings, we characterise as uncovering what has become covered and bringing it to light. Its opposite is what we experience today: the covering over of the truth, its concealment by clever argument and dialectic.

We would not characterise our age as community, because of its reliance on high-tech data and information, and its adversarial and dialectical approach to that information, and information's propagation by expert priest-like figures and professionals who manipulate it to nefarious ends, which is the opposite of communication.

Moreover, we would find one essential element in Islam, and in every society that has had at some point the remnants of the Islam of an ancient prophet, and we hold that every people has had such a being among them at some point, that there are two levels of communication, only one of which modern man considers real: inter-human communication. However, the other vital element that every sane culture has always been alert to is communication with the Unseen Divine; talking to Him in earnest supplication and hearing His address to us in His revealed book.

So this is an attempt to open up the idea of community: it is those who

have in common their deep existential need of the Creator and of each other, and those who communicate and commune.

You have to be such individuals that if no one else is acting as if in a community, you will yourselves create it. And if you cannot do that, you need to find people with whom you can do it. I do not mean to find a community, but to find people with whom you can express your community-making needs. Community is needed for the very prayer: Muslims pray in community. Community is needed for the *zakah*: we need others to give our *sadaqah* to; it is not merely that they need our *sadaqah*, although they may do, but that we need them to fulfil this aspect of our *din*, remembering that *sadaqah* can encompass many aspects of human behaviour along with the merely financial. Community is needed for the mutual reminder that is so intrinsic a part of Islam. We are a people who teach and are taught. Every Muslim has some arenas in which he teaches and some in which he is taught. Community is needed for our children to be able to emerge from the family into the world. Education means originally to “lead out”, to lead the child out of the child’s world and the safe zone of the family into the life it will need to live in its turn. Outwith community, children are led out into the world by institutions, and even the counter-culture, the anti-culture is now institutionalised, although people rarely recognise it. People almost never emerge from these overt and covert institutions. The community or the institution must not, however, be substitute safe worlds for the child but community is another natural means of its coming out into the world and into its adulthood in proper time.

Islam will have arrived in these lands when our children and grandchildren have taken on Islam as a completely natural expression of their being.

A core of our community is leadership. Islam is not a democracy. Democracy is the humanist thesis, hoping that, by the sheer numbers of people participating in the democratic process, we might escape from the tyranny of autocracy. But since Islam is not an autocracy, our first attempt to define our governance as the obedience of men to one of their own is simply not good enough either. Neither is Islam a theocracy; it is not the rule of priests and scholars. Islam is a nomocracy; it is the rule of law (*nomos*). So it is governance by one man counselled by, limited by and even directed by the people of knowledge among whom the people who have knowledge of the revealed law are the most significant, the *fuqaha*’.

This is unarguably the very nature of Muslim society from the time of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, himself, through the

Caliphates of the *khulafa' ar-rashidun*, may Allah be pleased with them, right down to our epoch before the interregnum we now experience in the caliphate.

Therefore, Islam can be said to have fully arrived in these lands when communities of Muslims born and brought up here spring up under the leadership of the best of us, guided by *fuqaha'* from these lands, knowledgeable first of all in the law and sciences of Islam, but also in the culture and history of these lands.

May Allah make you and me worthy of these responsibilities. Amin.

Assembly House, Norwich

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