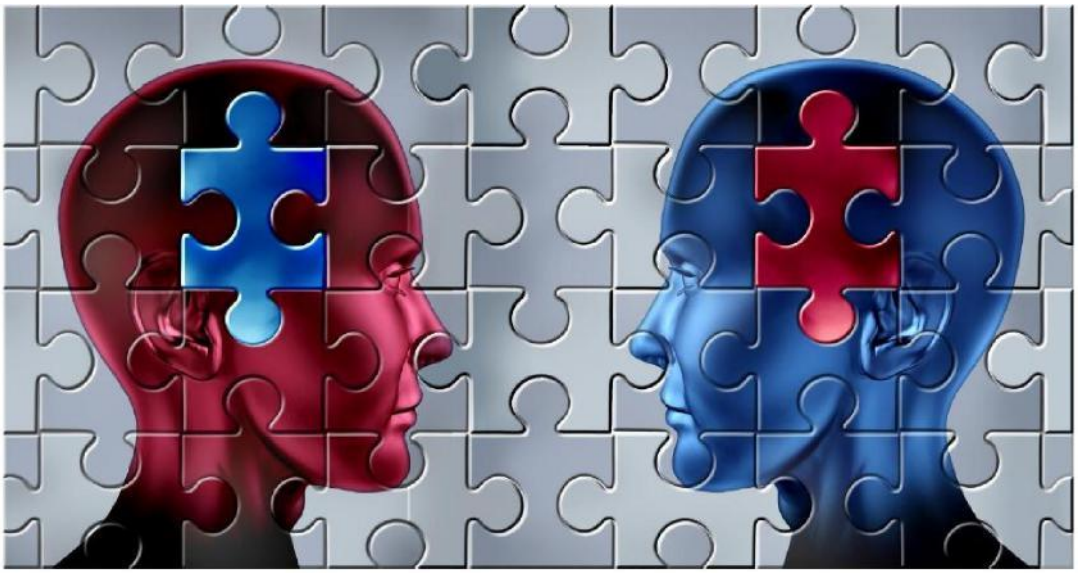

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Conversations with ... Mona Siddiqui

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Abstract: *The renowned Islamic theologian, Professor Mona Siddiqui OBE FRSE FRSA, is Professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Born in Karachi, Pakistan, the family moved to the UK in 1968 and she currently resides in Scotland. She earned her BA in Arabic and French at the University of Leeds, and her MA in Middle-Eastern Studies and PhD in Classical Islamic Law from the University of Manchester. In addition to being the first Muslim woman to be appointed the Head of Theology and Religious Studies Department at the University of Glasgow, she was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in Education and of the Royal Society of Arts in 2005. Her extensive body of academic literature includes books on the Qur'an (2007), Islam (2010), Islamic Law (2012a) and Christian-Muslim relations (2013a), as well as numerous chapters and articles on legal and ethical matters (1996, 2000 and 2004), and perceptions of Jesus in Islam (1997, 2005a and 2009). Professor Siddiqui has worked extensively on promoting interfaith relations, for which she was awarded an OBE in 2011, and she is currently a member of the Commission on Scottish Devolution, Chair of the BBC's Scottish Religious Advisory Committee, and a regular contributor to Thought for the Day on BBC Radio 4, as well as to many newspapers including: The Times, The Scotsman, The Guardian and the Sunday Herald. She also holds a visiting professorship at the universities of Utrecht and Tilburg, and is an associate scholar at Georgetown University's Berkley Centre for Religion, Peace and World Affairs.*

> ***Wilfred Cantwell Smith*** One's own 'religion' may be piety and faith, obedience, worship, and a vision of God. An alien 'religion' is a system of beliefs or rituals, an abstract and impersonal pattern of observables. A dialectic ensues, however. If one's own 'religion' is attacked, by unbelievers who necessarily conceptualize it schematically, or all religion is, by the indifferent, one tends to leap to the defence of what is attacked, so that presently participants of a faith - especially those most involved in argument - are using the term in the same externalist and theoretical sense as their opponents (1962:43).

> ***Mona Siddiqui*** Old conflicts have not ended but are already being overshadowed by new ones. And religion is being used as an instrument, defended as an ideology and attacked as extremism on all fronts. In a world where the pace of communication determines so much, religion too has become part of the global market and is selling itself in completely different and often dramatic ways" (2005b:1142-1143)

The attempt to peacefully negotiate between one's religious freedom whilst simultaneously living in a multi-faith and multi-belief society, is one of the most interesting dimensions of life in the UK. As Cantwell Smith (1962) suggests, holding a belief (whether it be associated with religious or secular views) results in the advocate necessarily holding a position that differs to the "other". Thus, whether a person holds a religious, agnostic, or atheistic viewpoint, they still hold a particular belief or set of beliefs and will generally defend those views against any who contradict them. Although this difference is a part of everyday life, which is peacefully negotiated by the majority of the population, it has on occasion been used to incite individuals to engage in violence, extremism, and terrorism: activities that create ethical debates into the positive and negative role that particular belief system can play in society.

One potent example that comes to mind is that of 9/11: an extreme act of violence conducted in defence of a faith, in an attempt to have certain ideas heard within the crowded marketplace of beliefs. The religious language and overtones used by those who attempted to justify those acts has not only had a lasting impact on the general perceptions of the associated religion, Islam, but also upon those who follow that faith. It has encouraged some scholars, such as Huntington (1997) and Lewis (2002) to use 9/11 as a rallying point, an archetypal example of difference: Western capitalist non-Islamic powers versus the Islamic non-capitalist world. This in turn resulted in a rise of anti-Islamic or Islamophobic literature, as well as groups such as the English Defence League. Conversely, there has also been a rise in those who argue 9/11 is an unfair representation of the Islamic faith; that Islam is a religion of peace, and that Huntington's assertion that there is a clash of civilisations "is not a reality" (Ramadan 2004: 226). However, those who advocate in defence of Islam often feel that their voice falls on deaf ears due to the strength of opinion against their beliefs and attempts to reconcile such disparate views is difficult when examples of extreme violence are used to justify the arguments against a faith.

To some degree, terrorism has almost become the prism through which some now see Islam, or, indeed, religious belief in general (see Odone 2014). Examples of extreme violence, conducted in the name of a religion, have made it harder for theists to express and justify their views and perhaps making it harder for them to live according to their faith within secular British society. Although some do try to rectify these issues through interfaith dialogue and community cohesion projects, many simply avoid such interactions, reducing contact and thus increasing segregation. In my opinion, it is our perceptions of terrorism that has affected our ability to live together in integrated and multicultural society. I do not mean our ability to live side-by-side but to actually have meaningful interactions within society.

Mona Siddiqui similarly argues that living together in society does not simply require an ability to tolerate each other, but also to engage in meaningful interactions and dialogues. However, she does not believe that terrorism has caused the current issues surrounding integration, but rather that people need to feel that they have a stake in society to truly interact on a meaningful level (Siddiqui 2012b).

Her work on historical examples of interfaith dialogue is particularly interesting because it highlights how different religions have managed to interact despite the sensitivities surrounding the given subject matter, making it something that typically hindered their ability to engage with each other. For example, her most recent book, *Christians, Muslims and Jesus* (2013b), details the dialogues that occurred between Christian and Muslim theologians, when discussing the nature of Jesus (either as a Messiah or a Prophet). She argues that it was the dealing of these seemingly disparate (and sensitive) theological views that actually encouraged meaningful discussions and thus helped create empathy between peoples (Siddiqui 2013:3).

In her recent Chaplaincy lecture here at the University of Warwick as part of the Distinguished Lecture Series,[1] Siddiqui discussed current issues concerning the nature of free speech: whether those of a religious affiliation can truly be heard when secularisation and non-faith dominates British public life. Again, Siddiqui's attempt to tackle a controversial topic provided insights into the importance of maintaining dialogue, even if the dialogue itself is deemed highly sensitive. In our subsequent discussion, she suggested that "there is a sense amongst people of religious faith that they're marginalised, that their voices are unheard," but that it is important that those of a religious faith stay in public life, to make sure that all opinions can be heard. In doing so, religious believers will have a stake in society because it is only through continuous dialogue that true understanding and integration between peoples can occur.

However, my concern with her argument is that some groups do not feel that simply getting their opinions into the public domain is enough. They may strongly feel the need to be heard, which can turn into more extreme forms of public expressions, including violence. For example, individuals such as Osama bin Laden wrote numerous articles prior to the 9/11 attacks, but it was only after the event that many people began to read his views. Although many of his ideas were extreme, some of the sentiments therein were not unique and did reflect certain wider concerns at the time. Thus, perhaps, it is not enough to simply encourage people to speak out, but also to encourage people to truly listen and to engage with views that may vastly differ to their own, because that may help prevent individuals from resorting to extreme acts of expression in the future.

[1] For a videoed recording, see: *www2.warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/events/distinguisedlecture/monasiddiqui*

In my opinion, we cannot ignore the effects that these extremist voices, as expressed through violent acts, have in wider society. I believe that they have affected our ability to truly integrate and listen to each other. With this in mind, I began my conversation with Mona Siddiqui. Although our views on what causes society to remain segregated are different, our conversation is perhaps the best endorsement of our mutual respect for engaging in meaningful dialogues.

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AQ: *My argument is that acts of terrorism, such as 9/11 and 7/7, have impacted on people's perceptions of each other ... For example, I've found in my current research, that 9/11 is an issue that often arises as something that has affected young people's perceptions of religious groups. So, I was wondering what your thoughts were on the impact of those particular types of terrorist attacks on communities within the UK?*

MS: Since I don't work with communities, it's very difficult to know what they're thinking. But ... I do think that the Government, governments, are caught between what is causing terrorism and also what affect that is having on people's perceptions of belonging here, and that's not easy ... [To me], the whole impact of terrorism is just one aspect [of what is happening]. I want to see is how communities have actually developed by the third and fourth generation, and many communities haven't, either economically or intellectually or emotionally, they're still trapped in the 60s and 70s. [In my mind], terrorism comes and goes, but it is the fundamental issues in these communities that needs to be addressed.

AQ: *So what would you say the fundamental issues are that need to be addressed? And how can the government help with those issues?*

MS: Well the government ... can make you feel a citizen by giving you a passport or a nationality but can it instil a sense of belonging? I don't know. I think these are things that the communities themselves need to think about. If they don't feel a sense of belonging, why is that? If they do feel a sense of belonging, then what kind of life do they want to leave for their children? And I'm not sure that we have those kinds of conversations ...

I think that any time things [terrorist attacks] happen, there's always 'you're doing this to us and we're doing this to you' and I think that Muslim communities, whether they like it or not, even if the government has made mistakes, there are real issues that have nothing to do with terrorism that are dragging these communities down and that's what they have to look at and address, and until we learn how to do that all of this [terrorism talk] is just froth.

AQ: *In a way I suppose terrorism is ... something that could be described as a pointer to wider social issues. So what would you say that these communities need to help them, if it isn't in terms of counter-terrorism policies, such as the Prevent Strategy, and so on?*

MS: It's not so much what can communities do to integrate but the question is, do they want to be part of wider society? You know, you can put in as many things as you want, but if people don't want to feel that they will do anything else, then they won't do anything else – the State can't force them. And that's the problem. So they have to have an inner-philosophical attitude – which is, *What are we doing in this country? How do we make life better for our children? And how do we get them in a place where we want them to be?* And for that, we need to be aware that we are in a liberal plural democracy that is full of things that we may or may not find are part of society and that they have to be engaged with, and many Muslims don't feel that they engage with [society] ...

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Siddiqui's argument that there are deeper, more fundamental issues to the problems surrounding integration is persuasive; in particular the idea that people need a sense of belonging to feel truly integrated into society. I would disagree that terrorism is the 'froth' on the top. In my opinion, terrorism has deeply affected the perceptions people have of each other. It significantly affects the depth of our interactions, in particular between non-Muslim and Muslim communities, thus it needs to be incorporated into the discussion, if we are ever to overcome some of the current social divisions. However, it is not the only problem facing communities today. As Siddiqui noted, our sense of belonging and identity are also fundamental to this debate, and thus these also require more detailed discussions.

Another interesting dimension of integration is the connection to multiculturalism: the idea that communities contain multiple cultures and that these cultures can exist together, in an interactive and

positive manner. I thus asked Siddiqui for her views on this topic and how multiculturalism had affected our sense of belonging and identity, as well as our ability to engage in meaningful dialogues.

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AQ: *What do you understand by the term 'multiculturalism'?*

MS: Well I've got a book coming in September, which is a personal theological journey of where I started and where I'm at, and I use various themes, such as marriage and death, religion in public life ... as pegs to talk about my own life, but also some scholarly debate around these issues. One of them is multiculturalism and I was thinking [that] there is so much political-oratory around multiculturalism that actually most of us (who grew up in the 70s and 80s) had no idea that this was some kind of political experiment and that we were part of an experiment that now is seen to be a failure by a lot of people. So I really don't think of multiculturalism as anything beyond what we were living, which was my parents coming to the UK, being welcomed to the UK, working all their lives and living as British Muslims, and that was what multiculturalism meant to me ...

Our discussion of multiculturalism these days is seen through the prism of terror so multiculturalism has been skewed completely because it's not really about diversity of cultures its more about loyalty to the State and as multiculturalism here in the UK, not everywhere but here in the UK, allows people to be British but not loyal to the State and that is a different kind of debate from people just living together irrespective of how closely they live together, but living together peacefully.

So I don't think that there is one way to look at multiculturalism and I think it's become a bad word really because people don't really know what it means except that it means something unsavoury ... but I think that most people who came in the 60s and 70s, even 80s, thought of themselves as just coming to Britain and Britain was their new home and not really part of this bigger political mountain.

AQ: *I find that interesting. Like you, I'm also from a partly-immigrant background. My grandparents were originally from Poland ... they came after World War 2 ... and when I have talked about immigration with them, they say similar things. However, I have also always felt proud to define myself as part-Polish; to define myself according to that heritage, which maybe on some level reflects some of the deeper issues that you were discussing.*

MS: Yes, I think that most people who have [come from an immigrant background], I mean second or third generations, always feel that. It doesn't matter how British they are, there's always some part of them, that even if it's not physically located elsewhere, has its roots elsewhere, so that's never going to go away... And that's not necessarily a sadness, it's just the way things are.
But I think that the obsession we have today with identity, I don't think it does anybody any favours. I think that there are communities of people who really don't feel loyalty to the State, for whatever reason, and that's a different conversation, not necessarily multiculturalism, whatever that means.

AQ: *So how do you define yourself?*

MS: Britain is my home, simple as that. I've never known any other home, so ... we weren't a family who went back very often to Pakistan ... and my children are growing up in the UK, so this is their home.

I suppose ... there's always going to be some spectre in your life that you are living in a different culture or multiple cultures that is going to be ... stepping in and out of different ways of thinking about things but I think that the basic principles have be the same wherever you live, that is about fidelity and trust and contributions to society and doing good, wherever you are, that's what home means.

AQ: *I find it interesting that you said that there wasn't this sort of divide in the 70s. So where do you think that it has come from, this idea that you have to identify yourself?*

MS: I think that it's been creeping up on us for the past 15 years or so, and it's been exacerbated by terrorism; but I think if you look at everything through the prism of terror, you are going to think everything is bad and that nobody feels at home. A lot of people just don't see themselves through that prism; a lot of families and especially a lot of Muslim families ... But I do think that we are probably thinking, rethinking ... well a lot of us are trying to rethink ... how do we get people to feel part of a wider society and not just communities living in society? I don't know whether that can be done. I don't know if people of radically different cultures can actually live and contribute equally. And I don't know why that is - maybe they don't have a sense of belonging, maybe their heart's somewhere else. That doesn't necessarily relate to radicalism or translate into something sinister - I do think that a lot of people may be living here but their hearts are elsewhere ...

AQ: *That reminds me a bit of some of the debates that come up with respect to the wearing of the hijab [Islamic headscarf]. Some [perhaps more extreme voices in society] see that as one of those visible signs of difference ... something that exacerbates social and cultural divisions.... As a Muslim woman who chooses not to wear it, I was wondering what are your views of that debate?*

MS: They [hijabs] are very visible symbols, reflecting some sort of inner-piety ... you can never know if someone is pious, so they look pious, that's all! But that's okay, if they want to wear it. My concern is why has this become such a potent factor of Islam over the past 15-20 years? My mother came in the 70s and nobody amongst her peers covered their hair like that ... so I've got resentment against it somehow, as if a whole cultural trend just veered off in another direction simply because Muslims wanted to create a new Islam in this cultural vacuum and it's not going away. But it's just, for me, some type of religious visibility, it doesn't mean any more... I mean, I could say as a Muslim I have to have the *hijab* on when I go out and another Muslim might say that that's not true at all. However ... how can a government legislate for things like that? And that's just a small example...

I've been involved in a religious freedom project at Georgetown University for 3 years now and their concern is that it doesn't matter what people of faith, particularly what Christians say, the government goes and does what it wants - they've latched onto same-sex marriage ... and my question to them is how does the government, how can any state, cater for lived religion in all its diversity? ...

AQ: *What do you think cause problems in terms of legislating between personal freedom and differing [religious] opinions?*

MS: [Issues such as] same-sex marriage or equality in the state... and although there is a backlash against equality, I don't think that we can turn back from equality, I think that it's been a hard fought struggle ... to say that we shouldn't have equality or that there should be exemptions – I think that would open the door to all kinds of dangerous areas.

So as long as you've got your mosques you can go and worship there and people might ask to have a same-sex marriage there ... I mean, I don't think that would happen now, but 20 to 30 years down the line, it could because of equality and individual human rights momentum in our current age.

AQ: *How do you personally deal with that? I mean, coming from a faith background it's almost like a conflict between your faith and modern society, so how do you respond?*

MS: For me personally it's not a conflict but it is a conflict for other people because they don't want to even think about these things ... Once you go down that road of living societies, living democracies and individual freedoms, you can't turn back from that. I don't see how anyone is going to be able to turn back from that and on what basis, theologically, do we have the right to say that person cannot have the same rights of equality as another member of the State, because that is what it would come down to ... You know, at least within the Christian churches, people are willing to discuss this, but I don't think that most Muslims societies are willing to discuss this, especially issues of homosexuality

AQ: *I heard that there was an openly gay mosque in New York or Washington D.C. [see Khan 2013]...*

MS: (Laughs) Yes, there probably is!

AQ: *Yes, they've somehow managed to compromise the belief in liberal equality with the views on homosexuality within Islamic theology ...*

MS: Well, even if they haven't, they must have just gone with "We are who we are and we are Muslim" and just as there are Christians who go to Church and say "We're gay", and the Church is about acceptance of everyone. It's probably the same route that they've taken. And a lot of them will probably argue that there is nothing about homosexuality in the Qur'an and to some extent they're probably right. The ... problem is with ... one verse, or the verses that are something about being tempted with homosexuality and because it's something that always fits with the tradition and is something that's always been condemned as something that is against human nature, irrespective of how people track out for it now, that's always still in the background...

AQ: *Perhaps then, these issues [the hijab (or general religious clothing) and homosexuality] have also become symbols of difference; something that is used to differentiate one's beliefs from the 'other' and they hinder our respective ability to become a truly integrated society.*

MS: Well, everybody knows that integration is a good thing, that you have no choice if you're going to live here! It's how you integrate and integration is about signing up to certain things: you sign up to a

pluralist society; you sign up to the fact that people can live their own lives; even if you violently disagree with them; you don't become violent; and that's part of being part of a pluralist democracy.

Integration also means that there are going to be things that are going to really test you – people's sexualities, people's religions, what your children do, who your children are – these are the types of things that are the daily bread and butter of our daily lives and unless you are prepared to sign up to all of that and say that its part of living in the pluralist society, then integration will remain just an abstract ... There's no clash with being Muslim [and British] and I think that most Muslims know that, but when it comes down to the nitty-gritty, what does it really mean? ... Unless you are willing to raise your children in that way [as part of a pluralist society], then you are still going to have this "them" and "us".

That's part of the problem. A lot of people of my parent's generation came here and didn't realise, and didn't know, that a good education is really about a holistic education. It wasn't just about having children and being doctors and so on, it was about making oneself understood. Education is such a powerful tool: to be educated in how to live your life in the best way possible wherever you are takes a lot of courage, but it also takes discipline and takes commitment to the society around you.

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Throughout our conversation, Siddiqui shed light on many difficult and controversial issues, which challenged my views about the importance of people's perceptions of terrorism within the debates concerning integration and multiculturalism in Britain. Although I still consider the issues surrounding terrorism to be essential to these discussions, Siddiqui made me more aware of other issues, such as the sense of belonging and identity, which also affects our ability to engage in meaningful dialogues. She made me question the importance I place on the 'prism of terrorism' and encouraged me to reconsider some of the conclusions I have reached in my current research. Therefore, although my core beliefs have not changed, I have become more open to different views and been affected in a positive way through my engagement in a meaningful dialogue.

Despite our varying perspectives, our discussion concluded on a point of mutual agreement: the notion that a holistic education is necessary to help us learn how to commit and communicate within the society around us. Although I would argue that schools (and in particular the academic subject Religious Studies) are crucial to such learning, teaching the core skills of both speaking our mind and listening to the views of others does not just occur within the school environment, it needs to supported by the teaching at home and within the wider community. To truly engage in meaningful discussions,

we not only need to learn about ourselves, but also learn how to truly listen and value those views that may vastly differ to our own. As I hope this conversation demonstrates, people from different cultural and belief backgrounds, with evidently different academic opinions, can have meaningful conversations about sensitive and controversial issues facing Britain today simply by listening and empathising with each other's perspectives.

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