

# BRITISH MUSLIMS: WHERE BRITAIN AND ISLAM INTERSECT

*The annual Muslim News Awards for Excellence were held in London on 27 March, with an impressive contingent of notable people up for honours. The nominees ranged from charity workers and artists to politicians and news anchors, all enjoying a night of glittering prizes at a plush Park Lane hotel.*

*This year's Muslim News Awards served to show that the efforts being made by both sides of a cultural divide are necessary to help achieve trust and eventual understanding.*

*UK Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, delivered the following speech:*

Assalamu Alaikum,

Thank you for that introduction. It is a great privilege to be invited here and to share the stage with the exceptional men and women who will be receiving awards a little later. Nowadays it can be hard to switch on the television or open a newspaper without seeing another awards ceremony for film stars and rock bands. All well and good – best of luck to them. But it is just as important – indeed, in my opinion, a lot more so – that we take the time to honour those who have used their talent and time in service of the broader community. That is what tonight is all about.

The first thing we are doing, of course, is paying tribute to the specific achievement of many individual Muslims over the past year. But there is another layer to tonight's proceedings. We are celebrating the very significant contribution which Muslim communities as a whole make year on year to our country.

Tonight I want to say a little about why that second layer is so important. Let me be clear: it is not because I think that British Muslims have anything special to prove in this regard; they show what they contribute to British society – their society – every day: bolstering our economy, invigorating education, sport and culture. Those of us who are not Muslims but who have the privilege of knowing and working closely with many Muslims can testify to that. The wider importance of these awards stems rather from this: by highlighting the success of the Muslim communities in Britain it reveals the nonsense in the claim that there is some sort of inherent contradiction between being Muslim and being British.

At this time in Britain – and throughout Europe – there is a very passionate, but sometimes rather confused, debate about the role of religion and faith communities in our society. Some people worry that faith and modernity are

in some way mutually exclusive. The thesis goes something like this: we, in what might loosely be termed 'the West', live in a modern, secular environment; our values are post-enlightenment, humanist ones; religion and religious people, which draw their inspiration and teachings from Divine authority and not from human reason, are throw-backs to a less sophisticated, more superstitious time. As such they are a dangerous and potentially divisive anachronism.

Now, I've heard this argument applied to followers of all religions. There were echoes of it in the reaction to recent remarks which the Prime Minister made about his personal religious beliefs on a late-night chat show. And in some parts of the media it is used as a criticism of the current United States administration. But here in Europe, a lot of the time when people talk about inherent tensions between religious belief and the modern world, what they are referring to is a clash between what they – from the outside – perceive to be 'Muslim values' and what they define as secular European values.

One explanation for this apparent singling out of Islam might be its reputation as a new European religion. In fact, of course, there have been Muslim communities in Europe for centuries. But it is true that in recent decades those communities have grown in size and that Islam is now the fastest growing religion here. Another reason might be the feeling that many people seem to have that Muslims are in some way more religious than followers of other faiths. Again, I think it is probably undeniable that for most of the Muslims whom I know their faith is more obviously apparent in their daily actions and rituals than it is in the daily lives of the majority of people in Britain.

If people want to argue that God does not exist and faith is not necessary, then that is absolutely their right and I respect that view – though I don't happen to agree with it. Besides, the major world faiths have shown remarkable resilience over the centuries. But what I will take issue with is the idea that any faith community here in Britain – and that includes the Muslim community – is in some way excluded from our modern society simply because of a profound and devout religious belief.

For one thing, it is wrong to assume that 'the West', including Europe, is essentially secular in nature. Here in the UK, in the last census 70 per cent of people identified themselves as being Christian. In the United States the figure is even higher and as many as two-thirds claim to go to Church every week. Religion is entwined into the political structures too. One of my first duties when I took over as Home Secretary in 1997 was to swear in new Bishops. England has a State church. Its bishops are