

# Islamism: National and International by Roy W Brown

Speech to the One Law for All conference: Apostasy, Sharia law and Human Rights held at Conway Hall, London, 11 December 2010, to mark Human Rights Day.

We are going to hear a great deal today about the oppressive and inhuman treatment of apostates, alleged blasphemers, women and non-Muslims in those states where Islam — or those who presume to speak in the name of Islam — hold sway. So I don't intend to rehearse the innumerable crimes against humanity being perpetrated even in this country in the name of Islam and Sharia law. I want rather to try to explain what we are up against politically — from where Islamism is drawing its strength, and what is driving this movement.

There are three main points I want to make. The first is this: what we are seeing in Britain today is a small part of a massively-funded international campaign to impose Islamist norms and values throughout the world. Secondly, that this is primarily a political, rather than a religious issue — an issue in which Islam is used both as a weapon to beat the opposition into silence, and as a shield to shelter Islamist policies from criticism. But my third point, and what for me is the most important, is that our politicians — of left, right and centre — have failed to understand the political nature of Islamism.

The Islamists are not seeking democratic change, but to replace democracy with religiously inspired totalitarianism.

If you believe — as many Christians, Muslims, Jews and Hindus do — that laws derive ultimately from God, then it ill-behoves anyone to try to change them. These laws will be fixed irrevocably in national constitutions — as they are, for example, in Pakistan, and as they have now become in Iraq and Afghanistan since the allied invasions. (Yes — the long term legacy of our invasion of those two countries is that both are now condemned to live under Sharia-based constitutions, unchangeable by normal democratic means.)

Islam, of course, is not monolithic. Since its earliest days and the split between the Sunnis and Shias there has been conflict between the two which now, after more than 1300 years, leads to almost daily suicide bombings throughout the Islamic world. One of the more interesting stories uncovered by WikiLeaks was the request by Saudi Arabia to the United States that they should bomb Iran's nuclear facilities — as Saudi Arabia and Iran vie for leadership of the Islamic world.

But right now it is Saudi Arabia that has the upper hand, based on its oil wealth and its willingness to promote hard-line Wahabi or Salafi Islam around the world. The CIA estimated that between 1980 and 2004 Saudi Arabia spent in excess of \$60 billion promoting hard-line Islam in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, the United States and Asia. That level of spending has, if anything, increased over the past five years.

Internationally, Saudi Arabia funds the Organisation of the Islamic Conference which unites all 57 Islamic States in a single powerful power bloc at the United Nations. This is the public face of Islam International, providing a veneer of unity based on a common belief in the supremacy of Islam — and on the money able to promote it worldwide.

At the United Nations the OIC has been behind attempts to create an internationally-binding blasphemy law — in the guise of “combating defamation of religion” — now rephrased as “vilification of religion”. This resolution will come up for voting in the UN General Assembly

again later this month. The good news, however, is that support for this resolution has been steadily declining over the past few years.

Now before I move on to talk about how this Saudi money is influencing the political landscape in Britain, I want to draw a clear distinction between Islam and Islam-ism. Islamism — in the words of Amir Taheri — is a political movement masquerading as a religion.

We have a long and hard-won tradition of democratic liberalism in this country and in Europe in general. We respect differences. We don't in general turn to violence to settle our political differences. And we don't expect our opponents to seek political power in order to change the system. We are therefore ill-prepared to respond to a political movement which seeks not simply power within our democratic framework, but to overthrow democracy itself and replace it with a theocracy.

For many years Europe's response to cultural and religious differences was multiculturalism — a policy that welcomed the newcomers and offered them equality in the market place of ideas. But how can one accept as part of our multi-culti society a political movement that not only refuses to accept the right of others to be different, but seeks to impose its own undemocratic norms and values on the rest of us?

I was delighted when the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel recently acknowledged that multiculturalism is dead. Can we hope that our politicians in this country will wake up to this fact — with regard to faith schools for example?

The fact is that in Britain, and in most of Europe, the Islamists are winning. Any criticism of Islam, of Islamic practices, or of Sharia law is greeted by cries of "Islamophobia!" And politicians, mindful of the Muslim vote in their constituencies, back off.

The Saudi-funded Muslim Brotherhood now controls over half the mosques in France. And according to press reports, the equally hard-line Deoband have taken over more than 600 mosques in Britain.

Right here in London we can see the effects of this spending. I'll give you just one example. In October the election for the Mayor of Tower Hamlets was won by Lutfur Rahman by a margin of more than two to one over the Labour Party candidate Helal Abbas. Mr Rahman was standing as an independent after being dropped by the Labour Party following well-founded accusations of financial irregularities, vote-rigging and corruption. But, tellingly, Mr Rahman had the support of the hard-line East London mosque and the Saudi-funded Islamic Forum of Europe. Mr Rahman now has absolute control over a budget of over £1 billion a year. I leave it to you to guess what kind of organisations can expect to benefit most from his largesse. But I will give you a clue.

Tower Hamlets has always been one of the poorest areas of London. From the first days of the development of Spitalfields it has welcomed immigrants. First came the Huguenot silk weavers: Protestants driven out of France following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in the 17th century. Then, at the end of the 19th century came the Jews, driven out by the pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe. Just one hundred years ago some areas of Bethnal Green were 80% Jewish. Today those same areas are 70% Muslim. But you will find very little of this history if you visit Bethnal Green today. A borough-funded memorial to celebrate

cultural diversity in Brick Lane contains only Islamic symbolism and you will find no reference whatsoever to its recent Jewish past or its beginnings as a haven for persecuted Protestants.

I have perhaps spent too much time talking about Tower Hamlets and not enough about what is going on internationally, but what we are seeing here is simply one example of what has been happening in many of Europe's larger cities. Malmö in Sweden, Brussels and other major cities are becoming Muslim majority areas — and let me make this clear — I do not see immigration as a problem per se. What is problematic is the influence of hard-line Islam — Islamism — on those immigrant communities.

I cannot make this point too strongly. Islamism is a political movement that is working within our democratic system in order to overturn it.

Many self-appointed spokesmen — and yes, it is always men — claim that the Muslim community is being unfairly singled out for blame and that we are guilty of “Islamophobia”. But the hostility to Islam — which I agree is certainly on the increase — did not arise in a vacuum. There is no equivalent hostility towards the Hindu religion, for example. The hostility arose as a reaction to, among other things, the behaviour of some young Muslims on our streets: such as those who demonstrate in the support of suicide bombers, or against the bodies of soldiers returning from Afghanistan. Young Muslims suffer from high levels of unemployment partly because they are being taught that Islam must take precedence over the normal activities of daily life. Many are taught to hate our society and its values: women's equality, democracy and freedom. What non-Muslim Europeans are now feeling is a reaction to that extremism. And it is not Islamophobia, an irrational fear of Islam, it is Islamo-nausea.

But we need to be far more nuanced in our response. We must oppose the far-right vilification of all Muslims just because they are Muslims. Our reaction must be to oppose extremism — but in the name of equality, freedom and democracy. We must recognize that it is Muslims themselves, and especially Muslim women, who are the first victims of Islamism. We must work by every legal means to uphold their rights to equality and autonomy, and we must fight every inch of the way against those who would deny them.

And to do this we have to engage with our politicians. We need mainstream politicians to take up this issue, to take courage and to expose Islamism for what it is, a pernicious totalitarian political movement, as much a threat to our liberal, democratic society as was fascism in the 20th century.

Thank you.

*Roy Brown is an international representative and former president of the [International Humanist and Ethical Union](#).*