

# Freedom of Speech & Tolerance in Islam

**An address by Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad, Head of the worldwide Ahmadiyya Muslim community delivered in Baitul Futuh Morden on 25 March 2006**

All the distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, Peace and blessings of Allah be upon you

Some months ago, a Danish newspaper published some cartoons about the Holy Founder of Islam, Hadhrat Muhammad<sup>(saw)</sup>\* in which, unfortunately, an attempt was made to show that the law and teaching brought by him is one of extremism. As a result, terrorism and cruelty has begun to grow in the hearts of the followers of Islam. It is alleged that Muslims believe that the solution to all their problems lies in adopting a cruel and barbaric attitude. According to them there is no concept of tolerance, reconciliation or love and affection in Islam.

Non-Muslims draw this conclusion based on the incorrect behaviour and improper actions of the so-called Jihadi organisations (that is to say those who are trigger-happy and call their act a holy war) and the attacks of their suicide bombers. Instead of solving issues through love and understanding, they display obstinacy and intolerance. Then, some scholars of today, unfortunately, support such Jihadi organisations even though their actions are totally opposed to the teachings of Islam. But I wish to say just one thing that may perhaps be construed as if I am supporting



such Jihadi organisations. The ultimate decisive authority assumed by the superpowers in respect of the poor and under-developed nations and the double standards in the manner in which the superpowers deal with these nations, is the cause of this violent natural reaction by these nations. Admittedly, this is not an Islamic method and is totally against the teachings of Islam. However, in this day and age, the trend not to

conform to the teachings of one's faith is as prevalent amongst followers of other religions as it is amongst Muslims whose majority is by lip-service Muslim even though their deeds are not Islamic.

In due course, a reformer is needed to make the act of the people conform to the teachings. This is why the Ahmadiyya Muslim community holds the belief that when, with the passage of time, the people begin to forget the teachings of their faith, then equipped with guidance from God, God sends prophets or reformers who bring mankind back to the ways of God, and thus remind man to discharge the obligations due to the Creator and His creation.

We Muslims believe that there have been 124,000 messengers who have come to the



“...it is a requirement of kindness to mankind that what you hold to be true for yourself, you should share it with the rest of mankind and include them also in this commandment”

world. They identified the One God and taught man to live in love and affection with each other. The last person to bring a new Law and teaching was Hadhrat Muhammad<sup>(saw)</sup>. In other words, a Muslim believes in all prophets and reformers from Adam to Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon them all.

Moreover, an Ahmadi Muslim believes that in accordance with what past prophets prophesied about a Reformer for the latter days, that Reformer has indeed come and we believe in him. Nevertheless, the Law and teaching is, of course, the same as that brought by Hadhrat Muhammad<sup>(saw)</sup>.

The purpose of this introduction is that a religion that requires belief in and respect of all prophets and believes that the teachings revealed to them at the time of their advent was true, then how can it be said that such a religion does not teach tolerance of other faiths? How can it not teach reconciliation and harmony with other faiths? How can it teach the habit of religious intolerance and advocate living with others in anything but love and affection? It is impossible. That there is no forbearance in this religion and no freedom of opinion or speech is an unfounded allegation against Islam.

In keeping with the constraints of time, I shall highlight a few examples of what the teachings of Islam are about tolerance; what the meaning of the freedom of expression and the right to hold an opinion are; what practical example the Prophet of Islam established of this beautiful teaching; and the tradition set by those Muslims who followed in his footsteps. I hope that as a result, some prominent aspects of this beautiful teaching will become clear.

But firstly, I would like to say that the very name ‘Islam’ contains an antidote for cruelty, the inability to put up with others and the absence of tolerance. I shall define some of the main meanings that the word ‘Islam’ incorporates. One meaning is peace, another meaning is submission and obedience, yet another is making peace and achieving reconciliation. One meaning is to leave someone when he is likely to cause you harm, another meaning is to walk together in harmony. The purpose of telling you about these definitions of the name of Islam given by God

Almighty to this religion is because the sum total of its teachings and the Muhammadan Laws include within it love, tolerance, endurance, and freedom of conscience and speech and the right to express an opinion.

After this brief clarification, let me mention the teachings about the freedom of conscience, belief and opinion and tolerance that the Holy Qur'an (the Sacred Book of Muslims) gives us. It should be remembered that when something is attributed to a religion, then the first point of reference has to be that religion's book of law in which the legal code, tenets, and teachings are set out.

When the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> claimed that he was a Messenger and by the command of Allah Almighty proclaimed that he was the Prophet sent with the final Law and the only means of salvation was to accept Islam and adapt their lives in accordance with the commandments of God Almighty, then this proclamation was stated as follows by God Almighty:

*And say, 'It is the truth from your Lord; wherefore let him who will, believe, and let him who will, disbelieve.'...*  
(Ch.18:V.30)

Thereafter, God has preserved this task unto Himself as to how to treat the one who does not believe. God will determine this matter whether in this world or the Hereafter. Therefore, O Prophet and O ye who believe in this Prophet, your work is only to convey the Message. In the interest of maintaining an environment of love and affection and tolerance, you should promote this message with kindness. Because you believe that in accordance with the teaching given to you by God, your religion is right and based on the truth, it is a requirement of kindness to mankind that what you hold to be true for yourself, you should share it with the rest of mankind and include them also in this commandment.

It may be objected that the permission to let people believe or disbelieve was given to the people of Makkah at a time when the position of the Muslims was very weak. It may be said that this is why such words were used so that the disbelievers of Makkah do not cruelly destroy all the Muslims.

This objection is a weak argument. Despite this commandment, the disbelievers of Makkah did not flinch a muscle in their cruelty to the Muslims. They persecuted them because of their faith. Some were laid on burning coal, others were made to lie on the burning sand in the mid-day sun. Some were tied with their legs to two camels and the camels driven in opposite directions cutting asunder the Muslim in two halves. Even the women were beaten and not spared this torture. So if the verse I quoted earlier was meant to save the Muslims from cruelty, then history proves that it did not serve that purpose. This commandment was not limited to that time but is preserved in the Holy Qur'an to this day.

I have given this example of barbaric cruelty so that you can keep this context in your mind. Once again, in keeping within the constraints of time, I hope that you will understand from the one or two events that I will relate, the extent to which Islam grants the freedom of conscience and requires tolerance and reconciliation.

Fed up with the cruelty inflicted by their fellow countrymen, the Muslims migrated to Madinah. First of all, the poor and weak Muslims migrated followed by the Holy Prophet of Islam<sup>(saw)</sup>. Upon his arrival, a pact was drawn with the Jews of Madinah who had not become Muslim at that time stating how the communities were to live together and remain free and how each other's rights were to be discharged.

I shall mention one or two covenants of this pact of co-existence. But before that a teaching of the Holy Qur'an states:

*There should be no compulsion in religion...* (Ch.2:V.257)

This commandment was revealed in Madinah. Let me remind you that by that time, a majority of the inhabitants of Madinah had become Muslim, or they were people who had no interest in religion and they joined the Muslims as birds of the same flock. When seen from that vantage point, the Muslim population represented a dominant majority. On the other side were the Jews who ruled and in whose hands lay the power before the arrival in Madinah of the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup>. But now the Jews were reduced to a minority. As a consequence, and being the Head of State, the governance of the Holy Prophet Muhammad<sup>(saw)</sup> was firmly established. Now he held the power. However, the commandment was that 'you will not use compulsion in religion, nor shall you use force against those weak persons who even though they are not Muslim, have joined you as your kith and kin, nor shall you use force against the Jews who live under your domain.' But you can see from the pact that was drawn up how an atmosphere of love and affection, freedom of belief and tolerance was created. The pact runs somewhat as follows:

1. Muslims and Jews shall live together with each other in kindness and sincerity and shall not commit any excess nor be cruel to one another;
2. The Jews will keep to their own faith, and Muslims to their own;
3. The life and property of all citizens shall be respected and protected save in the case a crime has been committed by someone;
4. All disputes will be referred for the Prophet of Allah's decision because he has the determining authority but all decisions in respect of individual people shall be based on their respective laws.

And there are, of course, other terms of this agreement in addition to the four I have quoted. Now, see what effort has been used to establish a liberal and compassionate atmosphere in society. At that time there were no national laws. Each person lived in accordance with the traditions and laws of his or her own clan or tribe. The Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> did not say that you are a minority, and as might is right, you have to comply with the laws of the Muslim majority. Instead, the condition of the agreement was that your affairs would be determined on the basis of your own laws. This is the first charter of freedom of conscience and faith in Islam.

Giving other excellent examples of toleration, the Holy Qur'an explains that no matter what the circumstance, you are not to abandon tolerance. Irrespective of the cruelties inflicted on you, you are not to act other than with justice and take revenge by being just as cruel. If you do that, you are misguided. To call you a Muslim would be meaningless. The Holy Qur'an states:

*...and let not a people's enmity incite you to act otherwise than with justice. Be always just, that is nearer to righteousness.*  
(Ch.5:V.9)

This is the standard of tolerance and justice in Islam. Islam advocates that do not respond to the low and base allegations of the opponents because to do that would make you just as cruel. If you can forgive, then forgive, that is better. If you must seek revenge, then the recompense of an injury is no more than the injury inflicted on you.

An excellent example of this tolerance and forgiveness was set by the Holy Prophet of Islam<sup>(saw)</sup> who forgave all the persecutors at the time of the victory of Makkah. History bears testimony to this event. Ikramah was the greatest enemy of Islam. Despite the general amnesty proclaimed by the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> on the day of victory, Ikramah picked a fight with the Muslims, suffered a

defeat and then fled. When Ikramah's wife pleaded for his forgiveness, the Holy Prophet(saw) forgave. Immediately after forgiveness, when Ikramah appeared before the Holy Prophet(saw), he said to him arrogantly that 'if you think that because of your forgiveness I have also become a Muslim, then let it be clear that I have not become a Muslim. If you can forgive me while I remain steadfast on my own faith, then that is fine, otherwise I leave'. The Holy Prophet(saw) said, 'You can, no doubt, remain steadfast on your faith. You are free in every way.' Moreover, thousands of Makkans had not accepted Islam and despite their defeat exercised their right of freedom of faith. So this is the teaching of the Holy Qur'an and the example set by the Holy Prophet(saw) on this matter.

I shall present some other examples of freedom of speech and tolerance.

*Once the Holy Prophet(saw) bought a camel from a Bedouin in exchange for about 90 kilos of dried dates. When the Prophet got home, he found that the dates had all gone.*

*In all honesty and simplicity, he went to the Bedouin and said frankly to him, 'O man of God! I bought a camel in exchange for dried dates and I thought that I had that much dates with me but when I reached home, I discovered that I did not have that many dates.'*

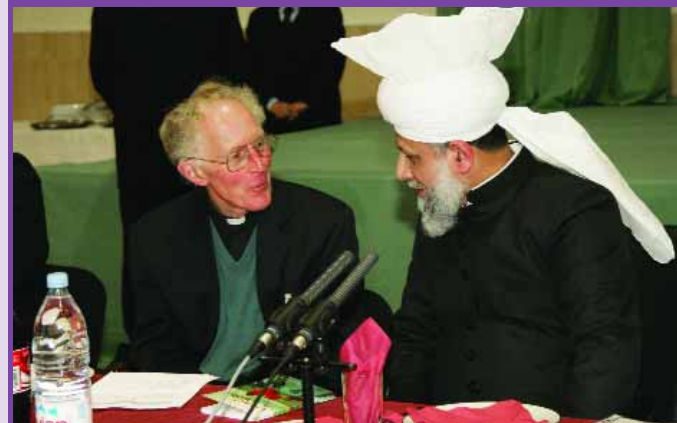
*The Bedouin said, 'O defrauder!'*

*The people began to tell the Bedouin off for talking to the Messenger of God in that manner but the Holy Prophet(saw) said, 'Let him be.'*

*(Musnad Ahmad bin Hanbal Vol.6 p.268 published Beirut)*

Now see this is how the ruler of the day dealt with an ordinary man. This was the standard of granting the freedom of speech and the standard of his forbearance.

Then let me present an incident about the freedom of faith with reference to people of other faiths. Once a delegation of Christians from Najaran came to the Holy Prophet(saw). During this meeting with him in the Prophet's Mosque in Madinah, the time for the Christians to say their prayers arose and they began to go outside. The Holy Prophet(saw) invited them to



**“An excellent example of this tolerance and forgiveness was set by the Holy Prophet of Islam(saw) who forgave all the persecutors at the time of the victory of Makkah”**

offer their prayers in the Mosque. Then the pact drawn with these Christians of Najaran granted them full freedom of faith and it was made incumbent upon the Muslims to protect their churches. No church should be destroyed nor should any priest be evicted or expelled. Nor should any right of theirs be diminished. Nor should any Christian be required to change his faith. The proclamation was that the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> hereby warrants his personal assurance. The pact went so far as to say that if the Muslims wish to help fund the repair etc. of the Christian churches, it would be an act of benevolence on their part.

With regard to justice, truth and the freedom of faith, the Founder of Jama'at Ahmadiyya, Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad<sup>(as)</sup> states that it is proven that once a dispute between a Muslim and a Jew came before the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup>. The Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> determined that the Jew was true and decreed against the claims of the Muslim. Then quoting the Holy Qur'an, he states that this verse means 'O Prophet! ask the people of the Book and the ignorant people of Arabia to enter the religion of Islam. So if they enter Islam, they have attained guidance but if they turn away, then your work is only to convey the Message of God.' It is not written in this verse that it is your task to wage war against them.

It is obvious from this verse that war was only permitted against the criminals who killed the Muslims or interfered with the maintenance of peace and were busy in theft and robbery. This war was as a result of his being a Commander and not because of his prophethood. Allah says '*fight in the cause of the Lord against those who fight with you*', that is to say, 'be disinterested in others and do not commit any excess'. God does not like those who commit excesses.

So this is the beautiful teaching of Islam and the excellent example of the Holy Prophet of Islam<sup>(saw)</sup>, a specimen of which I have laid before you. It is a great travesty to allege that there is no concept of freedom of faith and

conscience in Islam. We should not construe the vested interest of a few individuals as Islam nor can it be construed as such.

In any case, it would have become abundantly clear that whereas there is freedom of speech and tolerance in Islam, there is also the respect for mankind and forbearance.

In keeping within the constraints of time, I rest my case. I am most grateful to all of you. I think that the food is ready, and I do not wish to come between your food and you. I am most grateful to you who have come here today and listened to me, tolerantly. If we can meet together, many misunderstandings about each other can be removed. I once again thank you from the bottom of my heart for sparing your time to be with us today.

**Thank you.**

---

---

Love for All,  
Hatred for None

---

*\*The abbreviation 'saw' suffixed after the word the Holy Prophet<sup>(saw)</sup> or Muhammad<sup>(saw)</sup> is a salutation meaning 'peace and blessings of Allah be upon him'.*

## **FREEDOM OF SPEECH SEMINAR**

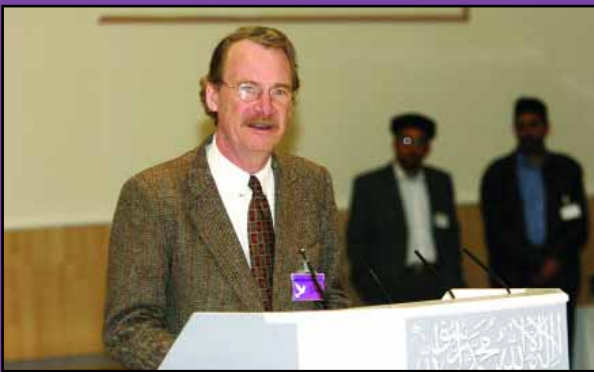
*The 'Freedom of Speech and Tolerance in Islam' seminar was a very successful event attended by over 250 guests from all faiths and walks of life. The highlight of the evening was the speech by Hadhrat Mirza Masroor Ahmad – Head of the worldwide Ahmadiyya Community.*

*Short speeches were also given by other people and quotes below should provide a gist of their sentiments about the community and the theme of the seminar.*



**RAFIQ AHMAD HAYAT – AMEER UK**

“The scale of reaction against the cartoons certainly reflects the degree of offence and seriousness of the offence caused. Equally the nature of reaction of some people – calling for a violent response to the publication – is absolutely wrong”.



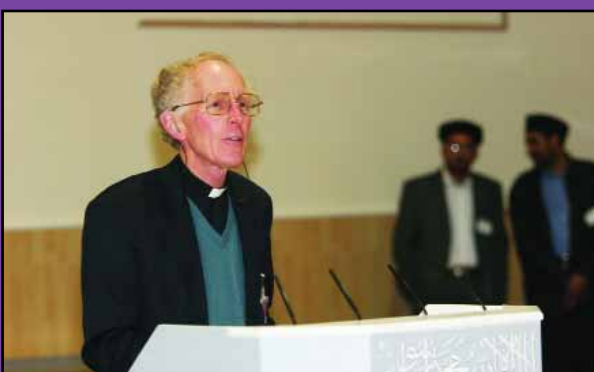
**MICHAEL MACEY – Cultural Attache at the US Embassy, London**

‘For me, a student of Islam for over 30 years, I am constantly amazed by the depth of service that is certainly represented by this community and tradition – by the depth of tolerance and the constant searching for what it means to be human’.



**STEVEN HAMMOND – (MP for Wimbledon)**

‘Our country is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multireligious society and the better for it... Your community has a history of peace, has a history of integrating with local people and a history of helping the local community... True followers know that the message of Islam is a message of peace.’



**REV. MARCUS RAYBROOK – (President of the World Congress of Faiths)**

‘I believe that learning and meeting with people of other faiths does not just bring about personal transformation, it brings about a way of transformation of the world’. ‘...I believe that interfaith sharing can lead us to a richer experience of the Divine’.

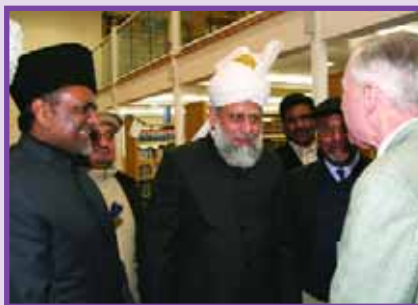


**JUDY SAUNDERS – (Hon. Mayor of Merton)**

‘Merton has a rich source of cultural and religious diversity. Your people have been the leaders in taking the peace movement that one step further...’ ‘We need to hear what you are saying – the true voice of Islam and not the distorted views of a tiny minority.’

# Freedom of Speech & Tolerance in Islam Seminar

**Saturday 25 March 2006 at Baitul Futuh Mosque, Morden**



**FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT:**

The Ahmadiyya Muslim Association UK, The London Mosque, 16 Gressenhall Road, London SW18 5QL

Tel: +44 20 8875 4321 Tel: +44 20 8687 7800 FAX: +44 20 8687 7899

[www.alislam.org](http://www.alislam.org)