

The politics of hate

Quran scholar on what Scotland needs to do next to tackle bigotry

COMMENT
BY PAIGHAM MUSTAFA

THE Scottish election campaign is dominated by one big issue – independence. It's the political question that seemingly won't go away as Scotland decides how much we like or don't like living inside the UK.

But I have a particular reason for believing that, whatever Scotland decides on May 6, we should also turn our attention to another important matter, the one of hate.

In Scotland the Hate Crime Bill has been passed and the legislation, we are told, will ensure our hate crime laws are fit for the 21st century. Additionally, "stirring up" hatred will now apply not only to disability and sexual orientation, but also to religious offences.

Humza Yousaf, the Justice Secretary, said: "Parliament has sent a strong and clear message to victims, perpetrators, communities and to wider society that offences motivated by prejudice will be treated seriously and will not be tolerated."

My own experience of hate is to have been publicly defamed, and my business and health badly affected. Twenty years ago, the "crime" I was charged with by several Muslim mosques in the west of Scotland, was of disparaging the Prophet Mohammed.

It was a baseless and false accusation, without any right of response, and an official written decree, known as a fatwa in the Muslim community, was issued against me and widely distributed. I was tried and found guilty without being able to defend myself.

As a consequence, my life and those of my family have been hugely impacted. I still receive threats as a result. At the time I was warned not to attend my own father's funeral.

Now that the author of The Satanic Verses, Salman Rushdie,

lives in the USA, I am the only UK citizen living under a fatwa.

Let's be clear what that means. To some Muslims, a fatwa represents a quasi-legal and religious decree to do whatever they like against me. Is that not stirring up hatred? Who exactly is the perpetrator, and who is the victim?

In the intervening period, as a Quranic scholar, I have written and published an exposition of the Quran – the book Muslims hold holy. I have also written and spoken extensively of the absolute need for Muslims to follow the true messages in the Quran – messages of peace, tolerance and inclusion between faiths and communities. I have to wonder, therefore, whether incitement to "stirring up hate" doesn't apply within the Muslim faith and whether, therefore, mosques and imams are above the law.

I believe that, whatever the result of the Scottish election, politicians of all parties need to re-affirm the importance of the universal values contained in the Quran.

Those universal values of justice, forgiveness and tolerance are there to bring people together as one community, whatever their race, sexual orientation or religion.

But it's more than that, because words alone don't add up to positive action. Justice not only needs to be done, but also needs to be seen to be done. However, where Islam is involved, many in authority are fearful of causing offence and the consequences it may bring, as it has done to me and my family.

In the current election campaign, there are not many politicians who will say that hate or the stirring up of hatred should not be a crime.

I have already written to Anas Sarwar MSP, leader of the Scottish Labour Party, to ask him to write to the Glasgow mosques to rescind the fatwa against me. I have not had the courtesy of an acknowledgement, let alone a response.



Paigham Mustafa was placed under a fatwa by several Scottish mosques 20 years ago

I will therefore now write to each of the leaders of the main opposition parties to ask for their support and for them to lobby the Justice Secretary, himself a Muslim, to move beyond words to real action.

I was accused, without evidence or right of reply, of "dissent" and "attacking the foundation of Islam". A formal edict was issued with many serious but unfounded accusations.

This false and damaging accusation still stands. So, where is the law to take the perpetrators to task? And where are the politicians to condemn such action?

Democracy starts with us as individuals, and all of us should be equal under the law rather than religious diktat. That gives us the freedom to speak out against bigotry and intolerance and, for me, to promote the true Quranic values of peace and harmony between faiths and communities.

However, my experience is that justice would rather turn a blind eye to anything that treads on religious sensitivity.

Over the years, along with death

threats, have come an enormous number of messages of support – many from Muslims who are uncomfortable with the intolerance now being displayed by many fellow Muslims, including Islamic religious leaders.

It is a direction of travel that can only foster more bigotry and more hatred. The real question, and one that I shall be posing to Scotland's political leaders, is whether they actually support the values that they so publicly profess to holding.

Independence shouldn't be the only item on the Scottish election agenda because, whatever Scotland decides, we will still have to live with one another – whatever our differences.

Paigham Mustafa has been researching, and studying the Quran since 1988 and spent over two years writing his exposition, which was published in 2016. He is a speaker on the Open Mosque Durban (SA) worldwide seminar and a leading member of the Oxford Institute of British Islam (OIBI)