

If Muslims love being British, they must act to ensure peace

Mona Siddiqui



We don't do religion well in public debate and we have certainly lost our way when it comes to Islam. Between the Muslim apologists crying out "Islamophobia!" every time there is an Islam-related story and those who see the growing Islamisation of Europe everywhere they go, there are multiple realities which simply get dismissed or ignored.

A recent poll by the BBC asking Muslim respondents about their loyalty to Britain created conflicting headlines pinned on that word "loyalty". Statistics can be dangerous because they conceal as much as they reveal. There are no nuances in this poll, in which Muslims are singled out as a block of people who have a moral obligation to answer these questions.

Yes, post *Charlie Hebdo* there is an inevitability about this kind of research. Yet if we are serious about this conversation then we need to have more sophisticated findings, rather than concluding that most Muslims may not be the psychopaths that we thought they were. As long as they answer in the right way, then we can rest assured that there are no growing ideological cracks in our societies.

The assumption here is that the large number, indeed 95%, of Muslims who said they felt a loyalty to Britain should comfort us all that the "them and us" divide is not as great as we thought. That 93% state that Muslims should always obey British laws sounds like the best news yet for social cohesion. But when 24% of respondents said that they supported violence against anyone who published images of the Prophet Muhammad, while almost half – 45% – believed that extremist clerics preach-

ing violence against the west were not "out of touch", you begin to wonder, what does "loyalty" actually mean?

Just because you don't want to bomb the country you live in does not mean you should silently support the violence of others. And while most may not wish to advocate *any* kind of violence, the question of blurred sympathies remains.

I am told frequently that there is a real sense of grievance among many Muslims – a grievance that they have to explain all the wrongs committed in the name of Islam; no other religion or community has to do this. The media fuels this constantly by focusing on Islam as a real threat to British values.

This might be a legitimate grievance, but it is also true that there is no alternative for Muslims other than recognising and confronting this growing perception themselves. They have to deal with the widening religious and social polarities in their own communities. It is this phenomenon which is creating the malaise of Muslim identity in Europe. No society is perfect, but a misplaced sense of injustice only serves the interests of those who want to spread more hate and more division.

I don't think any of us should deny the real threat posed by Islamist extremism, much of it being fuelled by all kinds of nationalist conflicts in the Middle East. It is the very idea of a liberal west that is the target of radical and political Islam. This is gaining momentum because it is played out as payback time for centuries of cultural and political colonialism involving Muslim lands.

The choice between "loyalty to state" versus "loyalty to religion" is a false and dangerous

one. What could be more alarming to the west than for a small minority gradually eroding the peaceful societies much of Europe has struggled to achieve? This is where radicalisation starts; it offers an alternative story of conviction and certainty, where Islam is gloriously triumphant again. Whether it is through sword-carrying militants or niqab-wearing women, it is presented as part of the same ideal.

We should not underestimate the powerful



rhetoric that makes this global Islamism appear less as a fantasy and more an achievable reality. This can appeal to many who might not even see themselves as violent or even as opposed to western values. Again, it is the idea of restored Muslim glory rather than the lived realities on the ground which is so seductive. This is the mindset into which Isis and other groups can easily tap. Denying this is denying the reality of the here and now.

Living in Europe is a privilege and demands a moral commitment to acting in a certain way. The west may have all kinds of issues, but it offers the most prized bedrock of any civil society – peace.

If Muslims love being British then they have to be active citizens to ensure this peace. This may seem like an unfair burden on them, but for the time being, simply reacting to events, rather than being part of a vision, will not ensure a healthy pluralism.

Being British is about feeling a sense of belonging to the country you call home, and while it may mean lots of things, it should not make you

feel any less Muslim. There are multiple ways of living a more faithful and inclusive Islam than the narrow and politicised discourse of today. Equally, loyalty is not a catch-all word.

It means being committed, through words and deeds, to the software of democracies, such as respect, tolerance and equality. But most importantly, it requires that you don't react violently towards those with whom you may disagree, or support violence against them.

No other religion currently has so many within the same faith killing one another. Yes, it may be happening "out there", far away, but its influence here is far-reaching.

Liberal democracies thrive on people of different backgrounds and beliefs being able to live together at some level. But such democracies will only flourish when people feel that for all their material as well as cultural differences, they have a stake in the moral life and well-being of the country they call home.

Mona Siddiqui is professor of Islamic and Interreligious Studies at the University of Edinburgh

Democracies flourish when people, for all their differences, have a stake in the wellbeing of the country they call home



Modern Britain: a sense of belonging. Corbis

