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Institutional inspiration

A British Islamic Academy would give Muslims a voice

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The principle of the comprehensive recipe has ever been that a leavening of middle-class pupils would make the mix rise. Now Bradford education authority has mooted applying this to the cultural rather than the class divide. Their schools are to have an "ethnic" limit of 75% - of Muslims or whites.

This is not impossible. Applicants can be asked their ethnic origin and governing bodies given a limiting formula, as comprehensives are, in theory, expected to do with achievement quotas of their intake. Then parental choice and the hurly-burly of applications, appeals, community action can come into play. Each family for itself, a little bit of bussing and bribing from the council and Abdul's your uncle! - the formula can be enforced.

Enforcing it will deepen the resentments of both the white and Asian communities of Bradford, Burnley, Oldham, Dewsbury, Tipton and wherever else. It won't solve the problem it has set out to address: the isolation and supposedly consequent alienation of the "ethnic" communities of the mill-to-mosque towns, which is assumed to have led to the Asian riots of last summer.

The good manners and bad assumptions of the race relations industry have distorted the analysis of what these riots were about. They were universally said to be "Asian" riots. They weren't. They were Muslim riots, involving British Muslims whose roots are still in Mirpur or Bangladesh, whose communities and traditions are organised around the mosque and increasingly around resurgent, fundamentalist Islam.

The inquiries that followed were incapable of accepting that there was a strong religious factor, and that factor was a new, distinctly British Islamic identity. They were not religious riots: young Muslims were not reacting against Christian theology. Neither were they civil liberty riots asking for money to alleviate unemployment or promote multiculturalism.

The mill-to-mosque towns are settlements of Mirpuris, people from the Pakistani side of the Kashmir border and, to a lesser extent, Bangladeshis, who took over the rotten shifts in the textile mills of the north. The first mill workers lived, 10 men to a room, in circumstances ignored by the rest of the country. They knew no British manners and

for cultivating a new patriotism. Mosques were set up through community subscription and the local schools became, in the course of a generation or more, uniformly Muslim.

The British boys who joined the Taliban and were captured fighting for Al-Qaida, came from these towns. The British Muslims apprehended in the Yemen two years ago for plotting to blow up British diplomats came from this background.

Theirs is probably the most serious alienation to have infected this society in decades. The failed formulae of race relations and labourism attributes all alienation to poverty, hopelessness, unemployment and, in this case, unfamiliarity with British culture. It proposes a percentage, a ratio of contact in schools as a remedy. Dip them in a bath of Britishness. Like prescribing hot and cold tubs to cure cancer.

Britain hasn't come close to understanding this alienation. It is not race relations gone wrong or the product of insufficient contact between communities. This is an international movement that has taken root like a virulent weed in Britain.

Let us waste no time on determining whether the magic formula for acculturation is 70/30 or 50/50. We should instead fight fire with fire. Or at least take note of the direction of the ill wind and fight fire with fire-breaks. Britain has to embrace Islam. Britain is uniquely placed to give institutional shape to the liberal Islam into which almost all of its Muslim population, coming from the subcontinent with its Sufi and Behalvi traditions, was born.

Britain has never formally accepted its place among the Islamic nations. India's Muslims are a minority and yet India boasts that it is the "second most populous Islamic nation" in the world. Britain has very small numbers but strong traditions of boasting. Our spinners could think of some way to give us significance in the Islamic world.

Islam in Britain is in turmoil. But how can Britain intercede? It can turn from occasional spin about welcoming Muslims to an informed national recognition of an institution organic to British Islam. Instead of, or even alongside the 75/25 schools, the public-private partnership formula should establish a British Islamic Academy, a Sandhurst of guardedly, studiously and inspiredly liberal Islam.

Such an academy, based in Bradford or Burnley, would be a college of excellence to rival any university and would spawn a network of junior academies at school level. It would be the voice of liberal Islam as only a British Islamic Academy, free of the orthodoxy, vested interest and politics in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan or elsewhere, could be. The governing board would be chosen for its non-fundamentalist credentials.

The academy, with international standards and standing (and, one hopes, a combative cricket 11) would attract the best of British Islamic thought and become a real multicultural institution, while subverting the ignorance spread in the absence of any counter force by the funda-Mullocracy. Its scholars would be steeped in the best of the western intellectual tradition and be aware of the fact that the future of the Muslims of

the west is coexistence, however full of intellectual combat.

• Farrukh Dhondy's latest novel for young adults, *Run*, is published by Bloomsbury. ©
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