

Transforming Perceptions, Improving Lives

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Margaret Atwood's dystopian novel 'The Handmaid's Tale' includes the following dark reflection from the morally ambivalent character Aunt Lydia: "Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it."¹ Her words are spoken in the context of a totalitarian society in which liberty exists within narrow parameters and there is little opportunity for women in particular to achieve self-fulfilment. It is a world far removed from twenty-first century Britain in which freedom from oppression and discrimination is enshrined in statute and freedom to flourish as an individual is encouraged through education. Yet the very essence of cherished freedom seems fragile for Muslims as a narrative of hatred and mistrust leads to violent flash-points and a disturbing sense of alienation.

Prior to 29 July 2024, the quiet seaside town of Southport would have seemed an unlikely place for the ignition of national riots. However, the tragic murder of three young girls attending a dance event in their summer holidays distorted its profile terribly². The horrific loss in itself was a heavy burden for the peaceful community to bear. What happened next revealed the intense hatred of a faction of British society for people they regard as being unwelcome outsiders.

Misinformation posted on social media claimed that the girls' killer - wrongly attributed a Muslim name - was an asylum seeker who had arrived in England by boat³. The impact of this claim, peddled by people far from Merseyside, was incendiary. Rioters, many from outside the area, gathered following the town's peaceful vigil of mourning with the intention of releasing their venom on the Muslim community. Hurling bricks at the local mosque and attacking nearby shops, they engendered fear in a grieving neighbourhood. Their actions were replicated over the next few days in other towns and cities – Rotherham, Hartlepool, Manchester, Aldershot, Blackpool, Belfast, Liverpool, Bolton, London. These were the worst extremes of civil disorder seen in the United

Kingdom for a decade, and to date over a thousand people have been arrested, and over six hundred charged following extensive police operations⁴. Culprits have ranged in age from 12 to 81 years. Far-right social media personalities with neo-Nazi opinions encouraged the angry mobs to storm hostels housing



refugees and defy police attempts to enforce the law. Being a Muslim felt dangerous.

Narratives purporting the incompatibility of Muslim and Western culture are not limited to Britain. Widespread unrest was seen in France in June 2023, sparked by the police killing of Nahel Merzouk, a teenager of North African descent⁵. This incident fuelled significant riots and highlighted deep-seated issues in French society, including tensions related to immigration and integration. In Germany, the growing popularity of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), particularly among Generation Z voters, is a cause for concern as anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric carries pernicious echoes of Nazism⁶. Then there's the American political landscape - particularly hostile territory during election periods when leaders' policies and statements can fuel xenophobic fervour⁷. Muslims are of course not the only ones to suffer the impact of nativism: its corrosive poison seeps into the whole of society, adversely affecting the economy and social cohesion by fostering suspicion, mistrust, resentment and hatred. Inevitably, this cauldron of loathing yields no winners and countless losers. The leaders – self-styled or elected – who stoke division often appeal to people whose own communities are suffering - from poor

1 Atwood, Margaret (1985) *The Handmaid's Tale*, p 24 (ISBN 9780385539241)

2 Southport stabbings - what we know so far about knife attack - BBC News

3 Social media fuelled Southport misinformation; UK home secretary says (ft.com)

4 Policing response to the 2024 summer riots (parliament.uk)

5 France shooting: Who was Nahel M, shot by French police in Nanterre? - BBC News

6 Going to the extreme: Inside Germany's far right - BBC News

7 <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep13/trump-repeats-lies-haitian-immigrants>

housing, limited job prospects, and fractured societal infrastructure. Fabricated or exaggerated anti-immigrant narrative too easily convinces people enduring economic disadvantage that resources are being diverted from them to 'incomers.' And it is all too easy to conflate Islam and immigration in a public imagination that is not informed by history.

Despite the gnawing anxiety that is generated through social and political unrest, there are reasons to be hopeful and optimistic about the future. Following the horrendous events in Southport, the local community rallied to rebuild the mosque and repair shops, epitomising solidarity and resilience⁸. As people from varied backgrounds stood shoulder to shoulder during peaceful counterdemonstrations in opposition to anti-immigration protesters, acts of courage and humanity shone through. In Liverpool, an Imam walked out of his mosque to greet far-right protesters and provide them with hot food, knowing that speaking with other people, even in extreme situations, is key to building bridges and finding solutions⁹. Similar examples were seen elsewhere. Following the terrorist attacks in Paris, people from all walks of life participated in unity rallies, demonstrating their commitment to peace and solidarity¹⁰, whilst in Germany numerous community groups have actively supported refugees, providing language lessons, job training, and cultural orientation to help them integrate and thrive in their new environment¹¹. Community solidarity in the United States is often manifested in diverse groups of people uniting to support victims of hate crimes. For example, after a mosque was vandalised in Texas, local residents of different faiths showed support and solidarity by cleaning and rebuilding it¹². On a larger scale, New York and Los Angeles have established city-wide programmes to welcome and support refugees, providing them with resources to construct new lives through initiatives including housing assistance, job training, and community integration. These examples, and so many others, highlight that the majority of people are driven by love and compassion. They inspire us to stand together and push back against hate. As Tolkien writes in *The Lord of the Rings*¹³, 'The world is indeed full of peril, and in it, there are many dark places; but still, there is much that is fair, and though

in all lands love is now mingled with grief, it grows perhaps the greater.'

Irrefutably, the answer to hate is not more hate. Addressing anti-Muslim sentiment in the West involves embodying the example of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, who brought mercy for humanity, as emphasised in Quraan 41:34: '*Repel evil with what is better, and your enemy will become as close as your intimate friend.*' Indeed, we need to counter hate with love. We must allay the groundless suspicions that our detractors hold, perceptions that are the result of ignorance that has flourished in part because we have not always succeeded in building the relationships to underpin trust and understanding.

There are two key practical strategies for Muslims in the West to demonstrate the positivity and capacity that they bring to their communities, and these can involve everyone - citizens, business leaders, scholars, politicians.

Firstly, we must ensure that we provide the highest quality education to enable Muslim children to be literate, numerate, speak fluently, write convincingly and flourish within an increasingly digital world. We must cultivate the highest levels of moral character (grounded in their Muslim faith) and a commitment to improving the lives of humanity while simultaneously providing them with the skills which are indispensable for meaningful employment. Our children hold the future in their hands and we must provide them with secure foundations.

Education is key to regeneration and cohesion within all of our diverse communities, and there are many ways in which Muslims can contribute. Learning has always been of crucial importance to Muslims. Indeed, the first word revealed to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was "*Iqra*" (Read) in Surah Al-Alaq (96:1): "*Read in the name of your Lord who created - Created man from a clot (a piece of thick coagulated blood). Read, and your Lord is the Most Generous - Who taught by the pen - Taught man that which he knew not.*" The prominence of literacy and learning from the very beginning of Islam is indisputable. Furthermore, during the Islamic Golden Age, a period spanning the mid-7th century to the mid-13th century, Muslim artists, engineers, scholars, poets, philosophers, geographers and traders evolved thinking

⁸ Southport residents clean-up streets amid protest 'heartbreak' - BBC News

⁹ Imam hugs man protesting against mosque, saying 'our hearts were broken as well' | UK News | Metro News

¹⁰ Paris attacks: Millions rally for unity in France - BBC News

¹¹ Who supports refugees? Diversity assent and pro-refugee engagement in Germany | Comparative Migration Studies | Full Text (springeropen.com)

¹² <https://colorlines.com/article/community-responds-texas-mosque-desecration>

¹³ Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel (1954) *The Lord of the Rings*, book 2: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, p465 (ISBN 9789510468463)



and achieved remarkable intellectual and cultural innovations. They preserved earlier traditions, translating copious ancient texts at the House of Wisdom in Baghdad, and added their new ideas and inventions in many fields as the Muslim world became a powerful centre for science, philosophy, medicine, and education. Muslims were the first to establish hospitals, and scholars such as Al-Razi and Ibn Sina (Avicenna) wrote comprehensive medical encyclopaedias that were used in Europe for centuries. Muslim astronomers developed the first astrolabe, which became indispensable for navigation. The Persian mathematician Al-Khwarizmi introduced the concept of solving quadratic equations and laid the foundation for modern algebra. Islamic countries are the home of many of the world's oldest universities and libraries.¹⁴ This is our heritage: we should be fiercely proud of it and ensure that our own young people are educated to be the engineers, scientists and creative thinkers of the future. We must translate our pride in the achievements of our predecessors into meaningful action to realise our children's dreams.

As members of school governing boards in community schools, we can be positive advocates for all children, regardless of their faith or heritage. We can offer the support and challenge to school leaders that promotes growth and raises standards. We also need to train more Muslim teachers and leaders to serve in our community schools, absolutely not to proselytise, but to be positive role models. We should establish further mentoring initiatives to provide our children with tailored individual support from successful individuals, to prepare them for prestigious career paths and benefit from the myriad of new employment opportunities. Those of us with the resources to do so should consider investing in scholarships to enable disadvantaged young people to benefit from studying

¹⁴ <https://www.1001inventions.com>

academic programmes at prestigious universities. We can set up initiatives to build young people's leadership skills, equipping them to be the principled decision makers of a future they will help shape.

Aside from our practical commitment to providing children with the education to succeed in whatever career they choose to pursue, we must continue to invest in Islamic education so that children grow into adults who understand and practise their faith with fidelity. We should do this by enhancing the supplementary schools in our mosques, improving the teaching and resources available within Islamic schools and developing inspirational Islamic higher education so that our future scholars are expertly prepared to undertake their valuable work.

Secondly, we should continue actively and positively contributing to local communities, towns and cities in the West, where we have made our homes. After all, our prophet brought mercy for the whole of humankind. As the Quraan states, "*We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.*" (Quraan 21:107). The mission of Prophet Mohammed ﷺ was one of support for universal creation. He instructed us to follow his example in the hadith: "The merciful are shown mercy by the All-Merciful. Show mercy to those on earth, and He who is in heaven will show mercy unto you." (Sunan At-Tarmidhi). When He returned from the Cave of Hira, disturbed following the first revelation from the Angel Gabriel, Lady Khadija reassured her husband, "By God, God will never disgrace you. You keep good relations with your family, you help the poor and the destitute, you serve your guests generously, and you assist those who are in need." (Sahih Al-Bukhari). These beautiful words emphasise that we should reach out to people of all faiths and beliefs who may be in need of our support.



Every year Muslims donate millions of pounds¹⁵ to charitable causes; a recent survey concluded that on average UK Muslims gave four times more in 2023 than the British average. While a substantial amount of charitable support is necessarily directed overseas, many Muslims also donate extensively to secular organisations to support work in local communities, where need is proliferating. The Department for Work and Pensions published statistics on food bank use for 2022-2023, showing that a staggering 2.3 million people in the UK lived in a household which had used a food bank in the previous twelve months¹⁶. Homelessness rose by 14% in the same year, with Shelter calculating that at least 309,000 people had no home in December 2023, a figure including 279,400 living in temporary accommodation, many of whom were families¹⁷. We achieve multiple benefits by supporting charities that begin at home, allocating more donations to improve education, healthcare, poverty relief, and community projects that positively impact all citizens in our communities, towns and western countries. Philanthropy is not just about giving money. Countless Muslims also contribute their time and skills by volunteering in local communities, giving practical support to organisations such as hospices, charity shops, shelters for the homeless, food banks, and rehabilitation centres. This visible involvement helps to break down barriers and build trust with all communities; enabling the steady erosion of the anti-Muslim narrative that encouraged thuggery on UK streets in the summer of 2024.

As the level of need intensifies, with domestic bills beyond the reach of low earners, it is clear that the development of a sustainable Muslim charitable infrastructure is necessary to support all disadvantaged people in the West. We should work with existing charities and organisations to create joint initiatives that address social issues, such as poverty, homelessness, and mental health. We may also need to establish new charities where we identify that particular needs are unmet. Crucially, our charitable endeavours should be for the benefit of our entire communities, irrespective of faith or ethnicity.

By maintaining our focus on these two strategies – supporting education and giving charitably to shore up the social infrastructure - we actively support a more inclusive and cohesive society. We also need to educate non-Muslim children about the amazing work that has been done by Muslims to shape the world in which we live and counter the vicious misinformation that distorts too many views. These are in so many ways two sides of the same coin, inherently and inextricably connected.

Star Academies¹⁸ is a working model of how these strands link and mutually impact. It is a rapidly expanding, high-achieving, not-for-profit multi-academy trust, operating both faith-based and non-faith schools. A values-based organisation, it works to improve the life chances of young people in areas of social and economic deprivation to help them succeed at the highest levels of education, employment and the professions. Its founder Muslim school,

¹⁵ British Muslims are most generous group in the UK | Charity Today News

¹⁶ Who is experiencing food insecurity in the UK? (parliament.uk)

¹⁷ At least 309,000 people homeless in England today - Shelter England

¹⁸ www.staracademies.org

Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School and Sixth Form College (TIGHS)¹⁹ has just celebrated its fortieth anniversary and has sustained standards over many years that are unmatched elsewhere in the country. It has consistently maintained a position whereby pupils of all abilities achieve around two GCSE grades better in each subject than their peers with comparable starting points. With truly exceptional performance across all metrics, the school is in a stratosphere of its own. Star Academies also operates a number of other excellent Eden schools (Muslim secondary schools) and Olive schools (Muslim primary schools), which are positioned highly in the DfE performance tables and are evidence that, with optimal quality teaching and pastoral care, the link between social disadvantage and low achievement can be decisively broken. All Star's Olive and Eden faith designated schools have been graded 'outstanding' by inspectors²⁰ for their faith offer, rooted in the Faithful Stars Framework which includes prayer, reflective worship, growth in knowledge and leadership development based on the principles of Islam.

These schools are also joyous places that provide a wealth of extra-curricular opportunities and foster young people's leadership skills. Faith is a golden thread, as shown recently at Tauheedul Islam Boys' High School ²¹ where pupils developed an awe-inspiring 'Immersive Islam' project through which they explored the *Seerah* (biography) of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) using state of the art virtual and augmented reality technologies. They explored and presented various aspects of the Prophet's life and curated a spectacular exhibition that enabled visitors from all backgrounds to understand the First Revelation, the Hijra (Migration), the Farewell Pilgrimage, the Final Sermon, and the Treaty at Hudaibiyyah. The pupils skilfully connected the ancient teachings of our religion with state of the art technology, deepening their faith as they grappled with its language.

Olive and Eden schools make a significant contribution to system leadership in the state education sector. Four of them have been accredited as teaching school hubs²², enabling them to use their expertise

to develop and embed high-quality teacher training within the regions in which they are located. In response to a growing crisis of pupil absence, a trend bucked by these Muslim schools, an attendance hub²³ has been established at Eden Boys' School, Birmingham, acknowledging its top ranking in the national attendance tables despite being located in a disadvantaged community.

These Muslim schools continually maximise opportunities to support local communities through their extensive philanthropic work. Charitable fundraising (schools raised £500,000 last year) and the thousands of hours of pupil volunteering make a tangible difference within the neighbourhoods they serve. They provide resources (food parcels, hot meals, free school uniforms and so on) to address material poverty. Pupils engage in intergenerational projects, forging relationships with local care home residents to offset loneliness and engage in creative activities.

As well as gaining academic qualifications, many young people achieve diplomas that recognise the lengths they go to in living out the values of service, teamwork, ambition and respect that characterise a healthy society in which freedoms and responsibilities are properly upheld. They have run soup kitchens in their communities and brought joy and friendship to people with no families to support them. They provide an antidote to fears that Generation Z is self-centred and blind to the needs of others, or that Muslims more generally are only concerned for fellow Muslims. Star Academies began modestly within an entirely Muslim community, continues assiduously to embody faith in action and has reached beyond into wider neighbourhoods and networks to build bridges, promote understanding and enhance opportunities. It's work in progress.

Aunt Lydia's advice, if Attwood's powerful prose could be reshaped for the future following this model might be:

"Freedom to and freedom from. Faith and community give us freedom from. Now you have freedom to. Embrace it."

¹⁹ Message from the Principal - Tauheedul Islam Girls' High School and Sixth Form College (TIGHS) | Part of Star Academies

²⁰ Section 48 Inspections - AMS UK (ams-uk.org)

²¹ Tauheedul Islam Boys' High School puts innovation at the forefront in 'Immersive Islam' event

²² List of teaching school hubs from September 2024 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

²³ Attendance hubs - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk)

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