

Activity 16

Us and them, or in this together?

– ‘Islam’ and ‘the West’

Summary

Young people consider some news stories about Islam in Britain and Islam in the world, and whether the stories show the West and Islam as locked in inevitable conflict (a ‘clash of civilizations’) or whether on the contrary there can be partnership and cooperation. On the basis of their reflections and conclusions they write real or imaginary letters to the local and national media, and to local and national councillors and MPs.

Why?

The benefits that young people gain from this exercise include the following. They:

- feel that they are respected and trusted, and that they are recognized as having views and opinions which are worth attending to
- have enhanced self-esteem and confidence in their own abilities to learn and to make a difference

- develop knowledge and understanding of the nature and consequences of racism in society, including Islamophobia
- consider critically how the media present stories, information and explanations
- develop pride in their own identity and strengths.

Preparation

You need some news stories or quotations, and two versions of the same tabulation, as for example in Handouts 29 and 30. The language in these handouts may need to be simplified or explained for some young people.

A specimen news story is provided in Handout 29.



Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 28

Stories about us and them

(a) Non-Muslim perspectives

Points of contrast	Closed narratives	Open narratives
Uniformity/diversity	Muslims are all much the same	There is great diversity amongst Muslims
Difference/similarity	Muslims are significantly different from non-Muslims	Muslims and non-Muslims have a great deal in common
Inferiority/equality	Muslims are morally and culturally inferior to non-Muslims	There is both good and bad everywhere – both in Muslims and non-Muslims
Threat/trust	Muslims are a threat to non-Muslims	There are both real and perceived threats on both sides
Conflict/cooperation	There is no possibility of Muslims and non-Muslims living and working cooperatively together, either in the world at large or within individual European societies	It is both possible and urgent that Muslims and non-Muslims should work together on solving or managing shared problems and building mutual confidence

(b) Muslim perspectives

Points of contrast	Closed narratives	Open narratives
Uniformity/diversity	Non-Muslims are all much the same	There is great diversity amongst non-Muslims
Difference/similarity	Non-Muslims are significantly different from Muslims	There are many commonalities between Muslims and non-Muslims
Inferiority/equality	Non-Muslims are morally and culturally inferior to Muslims	There is both good and bad everywhere – both in Muslims and non-Muslims
Threat/trust	Non-Muslims are a threat to Muslims	There are both real and perceived threats on both sides
Conflict/cooperation	There is no possibility of Muslims and non-Muslims living and working cooperatively together, either in the world at large or within individual European societies	It is both possible and urgent that Muslims and non-Muslims should work together on solving or managing shared problems and building mutual confidence

Procedure

Young people apply the five features of us/them thinking in Handout 28 to various news cuttings, or else to stories they have heard about. The purpose is to expand the various statements in the boxes by adding illustrative examples.

They may then look at the seven views of the world summarized in Handout 30, and similarly expand some of the statements with illustrative examples. Again, the language here may well need simplifying or explaining, and some of the historical references will need to be explained.

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 29

Muslims and the police, a news story

Scotland's first Muslim Police Association is being created in an attempt to encourage more Muslims to join and stay in the force.

Strathclyde Police hopes the group will also help tackle Islamophobia and improve understanding of Islam.

PC Amar Shakoor, who was Scotland's first Muslim officer, said negativity had recently been directed towards the Muslim community. He said the association hoped to put Islam in a more positive light.

'We want to highlight some of the positive things Islam can provide to the communities and not just the police services,' he said.

According to PC Shakoor, since the 9/11 World Trade Centre attack, London tube bombings and Glasgow airport attempted bombings, Muslims have faced suspicion and increasing scrutiny.

He said links were now more important than ever and one of the best ways to do this was to recruit more Muslim officers.

Strathclyde Police, which has more than 7,000 officers, has only about 31 Muslim officers among its ranks.

Earlier this year, Chief Constable Steve House met Muslim officers in England who had started a similar group. It has been quite successful, not only within the Muslim community, but also in tackling institutional issues within their own police forces.

But a big part of what the Muslim Police Association here in Scotland hopes to achieve is to encourage young Scottish Muslims, who might not otherwise consider a career with the police, to see it is a viable option - somewhere they can move up the ladder and become part of the establishment.

Chief Constable House said: 'The formation of the Muslim Police Association is a positive step'.

'These are officers who are positive about seeing the police force as a career and want to use their association to reach out to Muslims. They are not saying "Don't join the police, it's a bad career move", they are saying look, "Come and join, we're happy with our career choice, come and join".'

However, some young Scottish Muslims were not sold on the idea of becoming officers.

I met two young men at a chip shop in Pollokshields, a largely Muslim area of Glasgow. They said they would never join the police because their experiences with them had been largely negative.

But they supported the idea of a Muslim Police Association, especially if it meant more Muslim officers patrolling the areas in which they live.

One said: 'For Muslims especially, police are not our best friends. If you get a few Muslim people patrolling the area it'd be a good thing, especially on Eid and stuff like that. They think it's fights but really people are just celebrating. So a lot of stuff can be misinterpreted depending on who's patrolling the area'.

But getting more Muslim police officers in Muslim areas is easier said than done. There are only about 30,000 Muslims living in the Strathclyde region, making up just 1.5 per cent of the population so the number of recruits per capita will always be small.

But there is another issue at play.

Chief Constable House says Muslim police officers are just that – police officers. And they do not want to be treated any differently or be forced to police only one community.

Source: BBC Scotland, Friday, 9 May 2008.

Follow-up discussion: the concept of open-mindedness

The journalist Peregrine Worsthorne has said that Islam was 'once a great civilization worthy of being argued with' but now 'has degenerated into a primitive enemy fit only to be sensitively subjugated'. He makes two distinctions in this claim, the one to do with content ('great civilization'/'primitive enemy') and the other with regard to forms of thinking and relating ('argued with'/'subjugated'.) To see an individual or a group or a civilization as 'worthy of being argued with' is necessarily to be open-minded towards them. The hallmarks of open-mindedness include:

- readiness to change one's views, both of others and of oneself, in the light of new facts and evidence
- not deliberately distorting, or recklessly oversimplifying, incontestable facts
- not caricaturing the views of people with whom one disagrees
- not over-generalizing
- not being abusive when arguing, for example not claiming that one's opponents are evil or insane or sub-human
- not using double standards when comparing and contrasting others with oneself
- seeing difference and disagreement as a resource for understanding more about oneself, not as a threat
- seeking to understand other people's views and standpoints in their own terms, and where they are coming from – the narratives and stories with which they interpret events
- not claiming greater certainty than is warranted
- seeking consensus or, at least, a modus vivendi which keeps channels of communication open and permits all to maintain dignity.

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 30

What's the problem? – Seven views of 'Islam' and 'the West'

1. Religion

The problem is religion in general, which is merely ignorance, superstition and wishful thinking. The sooner human beings stop being religious the safer the world will be.

2. Islam

The problem is a particular religion: Islam. It's backward, barbaric and intolerant and supports the oppression of women. Islam is stuck in the Middle Ages. It needs a reformation, based on science and modern thinking.

3. The hijacking of Islam

The problem is Islamism, namely an interpretation of Islam that has its intellectual roots in organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood founded in Egypt after the first World War and subsequently developed by Sayyid Qutb in Egypt and Maulana Maududi in Pakistan. Alternative phrases or words instead of Islamism include political, militant or radical Islam; Islamic activism; Qutbism; jihadism; extremism; and fundamentalism. Islamism is a political ideology of hate.

4. West Asia/Middle East

The problem lies in the specific history of West Asia, particularly the history of Arab nations. Key events and factors of the last 100 years include the Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 for the dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, the Balfour Declaration and in due course the creation of the state of Israel, processes of decolonization and globalization, tensions and conflicts within and between Arab countries and between Arab countries and Iran, the Sunni/Shi'a rift, and the emergence of oil-rich economies.

5. The West

The problem is 'the West'. From the Crusades to colonization, and from moral and military support for Israel to the recent invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, Western powers have oppressed Muslim countries and cultures, and have developed forms of anti-Muslim hostility, Islamophobia and orientalism in order to justify their own behaviour. This has provoked, understandably, much bitterness and anti-western hostility in return.

6. Alienation

The problem lies in the alienation of young people of Muslim heritage born and educated in European countries. They are marginalized and excluded by processes of religious and racist discrimination and some turn to an ideology of nihilism and terrorism, intermixed with Islamism (see above), as a rhetoric of self-justification.

7. Conflicts of material interest

The problem is not in the first instance to do with differences of culture, religion, ideology or civilization. Rather, it is to do with conflicts of material interest. Globally, the key conflicts are around power, influence, territory and resources, particularly oil. Within urban areas in Europe they are around employment, housing, health and education. Such conflicts become 'religionized' or 'culturalized' – each side celebrates and idealizes its own traditions and cultural heritage, including religion, and denigrates the traditions of the other.

Source: Derived and developed from an article by Timothy Garton Ash, The Guardian, 15 September 2005.