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A brotherhood of man

Professor Mona Siddiqui on why this is a crucial time for Muslims – and for cities like Birmingham

About three years ago, I gave a lecture on citizenship as part of a series at Glasgow University.

I remember thinking that as a theologian, I felt at relative ease when dealing with language that touches on our understanding and perceptions of the transcendent and the hereafter such as omnipotence, salvation, sin and redemption; yet I recognised the difficulty in analysing the complex labyrinth of words which explore how the individual relates to society, how civic consciousness is a personal, local, national and ultimately a global issue.

But after thinking and researching the various concepts around citizenship, I started to think that the state itself may have very little to do with how I feel as a citizen. Despite its primacy as the fundamental political structure in society and its vast reach, the state remains limited in scope and operations in regard to the dynamics of social relations.

So if I feel myself to be a British citizen, then why do I feel this? For me, citizenship is not tied to having the right passport or being able to vote but in the sense of belonging – I need to feel that I belong to a place so that I want to contribute to it with my thoughts, my words and my actions; otherwise, I remain a passive citizen rather than an actively engaged person.

This is particularly so in democracies that can flourish, indeed are strengthened, only when individual participation is encouraged and critical thinking is allowed in private and public space without fear or threat.

I visited Birmingham properly for the first time this summer. In many ways, it is a sprawling urban mass with minorities living in both ghettoised areas

as well as in the more leafy suburbs.

For most ethnic minorities, this city is the only home they know, so the political rise of right-wing groups has come as a bit of a shock to them. Cities like Birmingham, where majority and minority communities have for decades built up relationships, understanding and coexistence despite social tensions, are at a crucial juncture.

That there existed cultural differences between the various minority groups in the United Kingdom had been accepted for the last 50 years; indeed, that was the vaguely-defined ethos of multiculturalism. We didn't think much about multiculturalism, it sort of happened around us, but the London bombings of 2005 branded multiculturalism a failure and in particular the Islamic component of multiculturalism.

The question amongst the population at large and the policy-makers was whether Muslims hold different values which will inevitably clash with the values of liberal democracies and civil societies of the west? When you add the words 'extremism' or 'radicalism' and they gradually become part of everyday language, whole communities are seen quite simply as a problem.

It is this sentiment that many groups use for gaining anti-Islamic momentum. This was evident recently in the demonstrations in Birmingham by the English Defence League. If the EDL is really about peaceful protests against militant Islam, then surely they should invite Muslims to join them; after all, most Muslims also deplore militancy and violence in the name of their faith.

But the purpose of such demonstrations goes deeper; it is about nostalgia for a Britain lost or hope for a new Britain rid of minorities, perhaps only be-

ginning with Muslims. As someone who has lived in Britain almost all of her life,

I would hope that this itself is a minority view, that the Britain I call home, remains a broadminded place, yet I can't take anything for granted.

Last Thursday, British National Party leader Nick Griffin appeared on *Question Time*. Much has been said about the inappropriateness of this invitation but I have said previously that, as an elected Member of the European Parliament, he should be given airtime whatever his views on Britishness and race.

If democracy is to stay strong, it will be strengthened by the struggle of different voices, competing moralities and contrasting value systems, not by silencing figures we choose to demonise.

As a Muslim myself, I know there are problems within minority communities and I know that many choose to turn a blind eye to deeply entrenched ways of thinking about family honour, and individual freedoms. But if I want to see transformation around me, I have to keep this debate alive - otherwise, how can I hope to witness change? A Chris-

tian theologian once said: 'Faith is not just about reflecting on the world, it is also about mending the world.' In many ways, this is imperative on all of us, it is our biggest challenge because peace does not come about simply through the absence of conflict; it comes about when we make peaceful co-existence our goal throughout the whole of our lives.

Despite the inevitability that people from diverse faiths and cultures may collide, every individual has to confront their own struggle to make the world a better and more just place.

The essential question is that within the context of civil society, how do Mus-



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lims see their engagement as minorities and majority citizens and upon what resources do they draw? Will the experience of living and working with different peoples and cultures be the factor in determining how pluralism develops?

For Muslims and Islamic states, this is about replacing the division of the world into the world of Islam and the world of the unbeliever by a world for all. It is about truly accepting that if diversity in all manners is God's will and blessing on earth, it must be accepted, intellectually as well as emotionally.

The imperative on us is how we free ourselves from dogmatism and prejudice and empathise with human diversity at a local, national and global level. Without reformulating the principle of coexistence, without promoting inclusivism both as a theological imperative and as a modern civic duty, Muslims will only ever see themselves as the dominant or the victims; the *ummah* must be the brotherhood of all people, not just the fraternity of Muslims.

This does not just mean intra-faith or inter-religious discourse but dialogue with a whole array of institutions and organisations that challenge us to look from within our own faiths at the problems of today, to be guided by the experts, by the voices traditionally silent, by the repressed, by the frightened, by the poor and marginalised and to be honest, compassionate and constructive players who can synchronise legitimate

and transparent ways to work, to realise a civic consciousness that is not just reactionary but truly visionary.

Muslims are part of European history, they stand at a crossroad as to what part they will have in Europe's future.

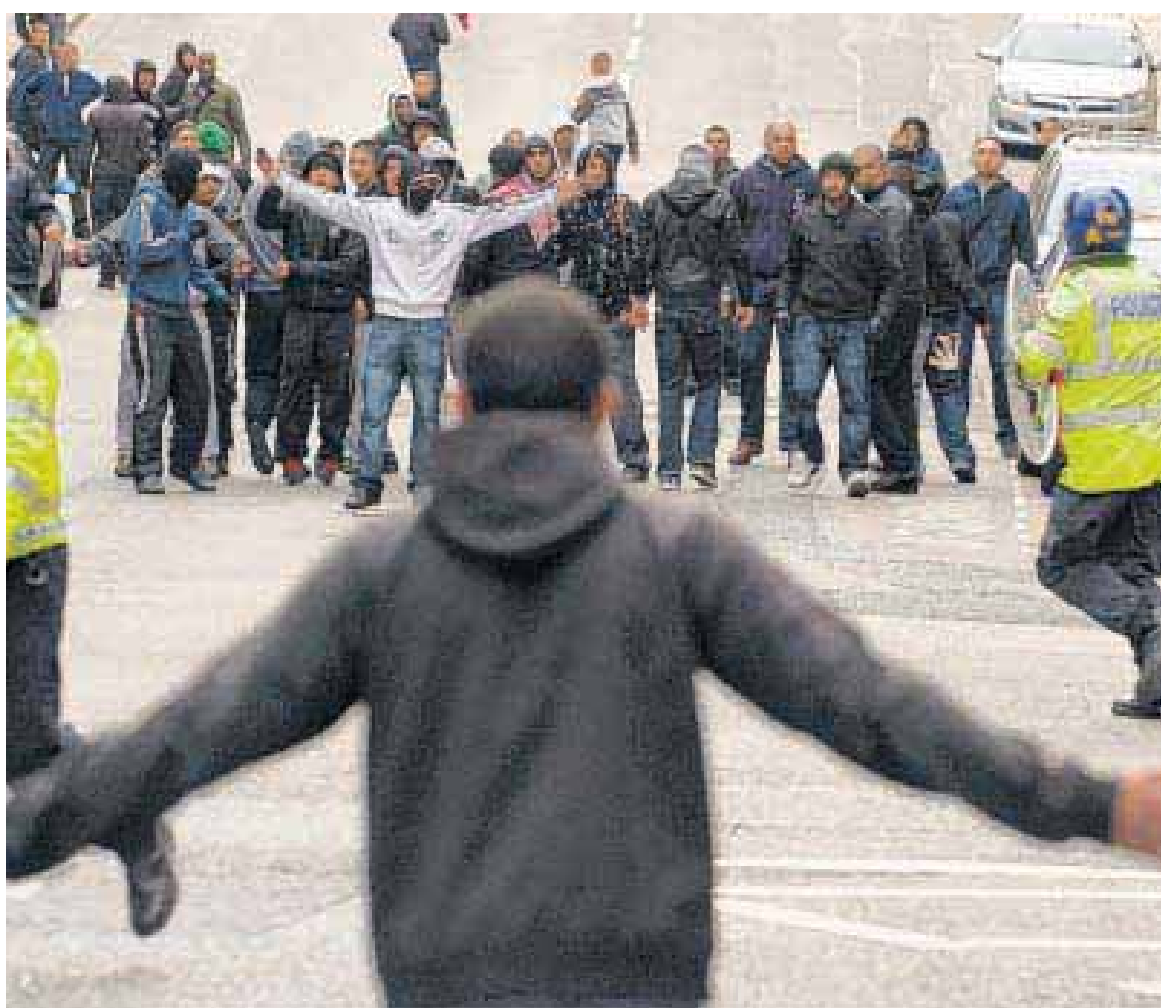
Professor Mona Siddiqui began her academic life with a BA in Arabic and French, which led to a PhD in Classical Islamic law. She founded the Centre for the Study of Islam at the University of Glasgow in 2008 and is known for her media work, including regular radio appearances and writing for the Scottish and British press.



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English Defence League supporters and anti-fascists clash in the centre of Birmingham earlier this year