

# “What we need to acknowledge from people like Iqbal is that you can have debate within a context of familiarity and friendship” – Bishop Nazir-Ali

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In February **Bishop Nazir-Ali** was in conversation with Professor Javed Majeed at an event on the philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal co-hosted by the South Asia Centre and Bloomsbury Pakistan. During the Bishop's visit to LSE, **Sonali Campion** interviewed him about the contemporary relevance of Iqbal's writing, particularly in questions around the relationship between religion and the state.



**You're here today to discuss the philosophy and thought of Muhammad Iqbal. What is it that interests you about him?**

For me it is the width of his engagement. He was entirely at home in the different traditions of the Islamic World, including Sufism but not only that, and he was entirely at home with Western scholarship – in literature and history but also in science. He was a polymath in many ways, and a lot of his work is very suggestive. He doesn't always give us final solutions to questions but he indicates a direction. That kind of open scholarship I find intriguing.

**Do you think there are parallels between Iqbal's musings on the future of the Muslim world in early 20th century British India, and contemporary questions around identity in the Muslim community?**

British India provided a kind of cosmopolitan background to thinkers like Iqbal – not only him, there were many others. After independence this was followed in many countries by a kind of narrowing of the horizons. Iqbal was suggesting things like a root and branch renewal of Islamic law – he was heavily critical of the way in which it was being used in British India, and I think he would have been very critical about some of the things which are said about it today – but this was not realised in the climate that followed partition.

I think what we need now is to expand the horizon again so that people are able to engage with the world as it is as well as with their heritage, and find ways forward in that context. People like Iqbal, and indeed his mentors like Shah Waliullah have indicated how this can be done, so it's not completely uncharted ground. Of course their age is now different to ours so we have to ask those questions afresh, but they have given us hints about how to navigate. That this can be done is encouraging.

**What is your view on the relationship between religion in the state in Pakistan? Because it isn't what Iqbal envisioned when he started putting forward the idea of a Muslim nation.**

Iqbal, and certainly Jinnah, were really arguing for a nationalist state where Muslims would be able to live in the way many felt they couldn't in a united India. Of course, many people who are not Muslims, like the Christian community in the Punjab, supported the Muslim League in this because they felt that one oppressed minority would have sympathy with other minorities that experienced oppression. That is not how it has turned out unfortunately, but that was their vision, and certainly as long as Jinnah was alive he was quite vigorous in promoting that vision. After his death it was encroached upon and chewed away, and then we had this turnaround where the very people that had opposed the creation of Pakistan became dominant and began to provide an Islamist vision that I believe was very

far from the kind of thing that Iqbal and Jinnah had envisioned.

## **What was your experience of being a Bishop in Pakistan compared to serving in this country?**

People often ask me this, one thing is in Pakistan, however early you come down to your study there is someone waiting for you. In Britain however early you start there's some paper waiting for you!

I was a Priest and a Bishop in Pakistan in very difficult circumstances, when the country was going through a process of Islamisation under General Zia. We found ourselves sometimes opposed to what he was proposing, for instance we were asked explicitly what we thought about his penal reform. We had to say that, from the Christian point of view, in punishment there must be an element of retribution of course, but there also has to be an element of reform and rehabilitation, which of course there couldn't have been in some of the punishments that he was introducing. We also worked with women, mainly Muslim women, and the Women's Action Forum and other organisations who were resisting a narrowing of their horizons. This was not popular with General Zia, but when Benazir Bhutto became Prime Minister some of the things we were doing were recognised thankfully. Third of course, we were concerned about the tightening of the situation for Christians and other non-Muslims.

## **How do you think that is playing out today? Because there are a lot of concerns around minority rights.**

There have been some improvements, the return to a common electorate is very welcome because this means that non-Muslims have a say in the constituency in which they live. Before they would elect their representatives on a nationwide basis, which meant that at the local Member of Parliament didn't have any interest in them. However, other discriminatory laws and practices remain in place, the Blasphemy Law is a dead hand on freedom of speech for Muslims as well as for non-Muslims. It seems to me that even the best traditions of Islam have suggested to us again and again that the prophet of Islam when he was insulted forgave those who insulted him so the question is how can you have His name on a law like that? As far as the effect on Christians, Ahmedis, and many Muslims are concerned, the main point is that it restricts freedom of speech and of expression. These freedoms should only be restricted in clear circumstances where it is likely to incite violence or discrimination against a group. Anything further – whether in this country or in Pakistan – is unnecessary.

## **To turn the lens to this country, you've referred to the idea of militant secularism in the UK – what do you mean by that?**

Militant secularism is that which finds no place for religion in the public square. So take education: the Church has been in the business of education for hundreds of years, whereas the State is a relative newcomer. A welcome newcomer, but then to turn around and say that the Church should have no place at all? The examples can be multiplied, but it's that kind of thing. There is a secularism that, at least in theory, is 'religion friendly'. India at one time was a model of that form of secularism. Indonesia is another example, although again not perfect. Where Britain is concerned, my own view is that the best guarantee of freedom of religion and of acceptance of the other would have been the Judeo-Christian worldview. Many people of other faiths would agree with this, that an acknowledged world view which is religious in nature is more likely to accommodate other religions than something which claims to be neutral but in fact is another worldview.

## **You suggest that we've gone wrong by taking the path of secularism and multiculturalism – can it be improved or do you think it has to revert?**

Reverting to things is not always desirable, we have to forge a new vision. What I would say in the British context is

that vision must be formed with everyone around the table, but with everyone acknowledging that the point of departure is the Judeo-Christian worldview in many matters (although not everything) because of the historical context. Take for instance the whole question around the dignity of the human person, which often recurs not just in public discourse but in things like legislation. The point of departure clearly in this country is that the dignity of the human person arises from the biblical view that we are made in God's image. That is why everyone has equal dignity. Even in this scenario people of other faiths can contribute their own insights to this. Islam for instance might say this has to do with being God's Caliph on earth, that God's Caliph is something given to humanity as a whole. This would be an interesting contribution. The protection of the human person, and of families, and of communities, is something that the Bible teaches for civic well being, but again Muslims have what they call *maqasid* of the Sharia, which also is concerned with the protection of human welfare. Insights from Humanists could be incorporated too. What I am saying is there has to be wide-ranging discussion.

**Finally, Iqbal's writing raises questions about the role of religion in the modern world. He was talking in the early 20th century, but what do you think he would have made of the 'clash of civilisation' rhetoric that's being used today by many right-wing groups?**

Iqbal does sometimes criticise Europe. He says that it is the greatest obstacle to human development and that kind of thing, but it's always in the context of dialogue, never conflict. He is at the same time studying and quoting from European writers, demonstrating that debate doesn't mean enmity. That lesson has been well learnt in the past, I so often refer to the judge who was sentencing Gandhi to prison while apologising for doing so – that's a good example. So what we need to acknowledge from people like Iqbal – and other Indian nationalists like Gandhi himself, and Nehru – is that you can have debate within a context of familiarity and friendship.

*Cover image: Bishop Nazir-Ali and Professor Javed Majeed speaking at LSE. Credit: Ozlem Koker. The presentation is available as a podcast [here](#).*

*This post gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

## About the Author

**Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali** was the 106th Bishop of Rochester, for 15 years, until 1 September 2009. He is originally from Asia and was the first non-white Diocesan Bishop in the Church of England. He was appointed in 1994. He was the General Secretary of CMS from 1989-1994 and before that served as Bishop of Raiwind in Pakistan.



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