



Debating the Islamophobia: Question Time 2019 teachers' notes

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Follow-up questions

The pledge referred to by Qari Asim, and of which he was a signatory, was shared in the Muslim Council for Britain's press release on 5th June 2017, following the London Bridge attack of June 2017:

'Alongside our friends and neighbours, we mourn this attack on our home, society and people, and feel pain for the suffering of the victims and their families. We pray to God that the perpetrators be judged in accordance with the gravity of their crimes in the hereafter. Their acts and wilful dismissal of our religious principles alienates them from any association with our community for whom the inviolability of every human life is the founding principle (Q.5:32).

Consequently, and in light of other such ethical principles which are quintessential to Islam, we will not perform the traditional Islamic funeral prayer for the perpetrators and we also urge fellow imams and religious authorities to withdraw such a privilege. This is because such indefensible actions are completely at odds with the lofty teachings of Islam.'

Qari Asim commented to The Guardian, 6th June 2017 at the time:

'We decided we needed to make a public statement, to send a strong message – effectively, you're not welcome in our community either in life or in death. This decision was not taken lightly. One of the last things you offer to the deceased is to seek forgiveness for them from God. By not performing the funeral prayer, we are not asking for forgiveness. The gravity of the crime is such that we feel it should be clear to young people that we cannot offer the prayer, though it is up to God to judge [the attackers].'

- Talk about the impact of the language used in these two statements on both people of faith and people of no faith.
- Students could discuss what they believe should be done to reduce the 'ignorance and fear' that Qari Asim identifies in the UK.

Featured panellists' biographies

Qari Asim MBE is a senior Imam at Makkah Mosque in Leeds and Legal Director at global law firm, DLA Piper. Qari is passionate about fostering relations between communities and is a trustee of Christian Muslim Forum. He is an executive board member of National Council of Imams & Rabbis, deputy chair of Government's Anti-Muslim Hatred/ Islamophobia Working Group and a faith advisor to the Near Neighbours programme. He also acts as a consultant to a number of mosques, institutions, public bodies and agencies, including Mosaic, founded by HRH Prince of Wales, to inspire young people to realise their talents and potential. He is interested in issues related to government policy, education, business, leadership, youth empowerment, gender equity, environment and social welfare. He is a blogger and columns or comments from him appear in *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *The Guardian*, *Yorkshire Post* and *Huffington Post*.

Context of the event

The Westminster Abbey Learning Department's largest 16+ event is the annual Question Time, following the format of the popular TV show. Over 250 students took the opportunity to engage with public figures from a variety of backgrounds on issues of their own choosing. For the Abbey, this is an opportunity to discuss the religious perspective on current affairs as on the panel each year are voices from the major UK faiths. Questions from students this year included the role of religion in the public space, the climate crisis, gender inequality and Islamophobia and led to passionate and articulate contributions from the floor, as well as from the distinguished panel.

This year's event was chaired by Samira Ahmed and our panel comprised of:

- Qari Asim MBE - Senior Imam and Inter-Faith Advisor
- The Reverend Laura Jørgensen - Rector of St Botolph without Aldgate, in the City
- Agamemnon Otero MBE - Co-founding director of community energy company Repowering
- The Rt Hon. Lord Willetts FRS - Executive Chair of the Resolution Foundation

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Transcript

Student 1: Is there a rise in your opinion of Islamophobia in the UK and, if so, why do you think this might be?

Student 2: How can we tighten legislation to prevent Islamophobia?

QA: Islamophobia is absolutely a problem. It's a challenge for our country but before I go into details, I think I'd like to say that Britain is one of the most tolerant countries in the world and may long it continue. But we need to focus on the challenging aspects: racism; bigotry; and hatred. A recent survey shows that 44% of the people surveyed thought that Islam was incompatible with Western civilisation because they thought the Sharia law was replacing British law. So what it really

tells us is that there's a lot of misinformation, there's misconceptions, there's ignorance, there's a lack of religious literacy about Islam which is creating this sense of fear, this phobia Islamophobia in us. People think that somehow Muslims are going to overtake Britain. There's only less than 5% of the population, you know literally you can't really do anything like that but this fear has been created. It's been created by sections of the media, it's been created by populist leaders, some even mainstream political leaders and as a result it's not a sign of a healthy society to have any community, religious or ethnic minority, feeling under threat.

Some people might say well there's a genuine concern because there are some people, known as Islamist extremists, who are going around blowing people. After the London Bridge attack. I brought imams from across the country, over 120 imams came and said that they will not offer the funeral prayer of Islamist extremists. That wasn't taken lightly because religion is all about compassion and this is the last prayer that's offered to someone who left this world. But because imams and religious leaders, the Muslims feel so passionate about this issue about saving our world and protecting our community and we said that those who are extremist and they commit terror and violence in our society, they are not welcome in Muslim community either in life or in death.

I can assure you it's not because of Islam, it's not because of the over 3 million Muslims, [that there are some people] who want to blow themselves up, who want to see this carnage, who want to see this violence in our society. It's rather those extreme fringe minority that are in every community, in every society, now we talking about on the other side the extreme far-right extremism emerging as well so what we all need to do is actually in this debate about us and them. All of us are on this side of us working against them the extremists whether it be the Islamist extremists, whether it be the far-right extremists or far left extremists, whoever they may be.

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