Commission for Countering Extremism

COUNTERING EXTREMISM
DEFENDING FREE SPEECH

Freedom of Expression and Social Cohesion: The Prospects for an Emerging British Islam

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Introduction: a clash of values

In 2016, Asad Shah, an Ahmadi Muslim shopkeeper in Glasgow, was stabbed to death by Tanveer Ahmed, a Sunni extremist who had travelled from Bradford to carry out the murder. Ahmed later claimed that Shah had committed blasphemy. Just five years earlier, Salman Taseer, a politician in Pakistan, was assassinated by his own bodyguard for defending a Christian woman accused of blasphemy. Two murders. Two different continents. Yet both crimes were rooted in the same impulse – an unwillingness to tolerate difference and a rejection of freedom of expression. Such incidents demand uncomfortable conversations about how we balance religious sensitivities with the freedom to speak our minds.

In the UK, a nation built on the principles of liberty and pluralism, this tension is not abstract. It is lived daily by British Muslims, who navigate the complexities of faith, identity and citizenship in a society that prizes free speech. For some, freedom of expression feels like a threat to their deepest beliefs. For others, it is the very foundation of a modern, cohesive society. How, then, can we reconcile these perspectives? Can Islam and freedom of expression coexist in a way that strengthens, rather than fractures, social cohesion?

This essay argues that they can—and must. Freedom of expression is not merely a Western value; it is a human value, one that finds resonance in Islamic thought and history. By exploring intellectual resources within Islam, engaging with contemporary challenges, and fostering dialogue, we can chart a path toward a thriving British Islam that embraces freedom while remaining true to its faith. The stakes are high: failure to address these tensions risks deepening divisions, empowering extremists and leaving young British Muslims adrift in a sea of competing identities. But if we get it right, the rewards are immense: a society where diversity is not just tolerated but celebrated and where British Muslims can flourish as full participants in the national story.

1. Freedom of expression as a bedrock of modern society

Freedom of expression is often described as the cornerstone of democracy, but its importance runs deeper than politics. It is the lifeblood of human progress, the mechanism by which ideas are tested, refined and either embraced or discarded. Freedom of expression is not merely a civil liberty; it is the architecture upon which pluralistic societies are built. It is the freedom that gives birth to all others: freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom to vote and freedom to protest.

In the UK, this principle is enshrined in law and culture, a legacy of centuries of struggle against tyranny and dogma. From the Magna Carta to the Enlightenment, the right to speak freely has been hard-won—and fiercely defended, woven into the national fabric. From the writings of John Milton, who railed against censorship to the abolitionists and suffragettes who used their voices to bring about social change, the story of Britain is the story of people speaking truth to power.

Yet freedom of expression comes with a paradox. It means tolerating uncomfortable, even offensive speech. It protects the atheist's critique of religion and the believer's defence of faith. This is what makes it indispensable in multi-faith, multi-ethnic societies like modern Britain.

Without this freedom, open dialogue shuts down. Suspicion grows. Social cohesion weakens. As history has shown, when speech is policed by fear, communities retreat into echo chambers and extremists step in to fill the void.

This is why we must make an unflinching stand for freedom – for everyone. Freedom to critique others. Freedom to challenge cultural norms. Freedom to question religion itself. Yet there is a nuance here: speaking freely does not have to involve offensive. And it shouldn't mean promoting hate. In fact, societies where speech is free also allow space to debate how that freedom is exercised responsibly. What is critical, though, is resisting the temptation to legislate against offense and instead to build the resilience needed to live with difference. Thus, while it is important to have laws that ensure people are not harmed – laws which need constant review and strengthening where necessary – the abolition in May 2008 of long-standing blasphemy legislation in the UK was a perfectly natural and reasonable step.

So freedom of expression is not just about the right to speak; it is also about the responsibility to listen. In a diverse society like the UK, where multiple faiths, cultures, and worldviews coexist, free speech becomes the bridge that connects us. It allows us to air our differences, to challenge one another, and ultimately, to find common ground. This is not always comfortable. It requires us to confront ideas we may strongly disagree with and to accept that our own beliefs may be scrutinised. But it is precisely this discomfort that makes freedom of expression so vital. It forces us to grow, to question, and to evolve.

For British Muslims, this principle is both an opportunity and a challenge. On one hand, it offers a platform to counter stereotypes, and to contribute to the national conversation. On the other hand, it exposes them to criticism, satire, and even ridicule—a reality that can feel deeply painful, particularly when it touches on sacred beliefs. Yet the alternative—a society where certain topics are off-limits, where dissent is silenced, and where offence is avoided at all costs—is worse. It is a society where dialogue dies, where we then don't learn how to get along and where extremism can thus thrive.

Consider the case of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris in 2015. The satirical magazine's decision to publish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad was seen by many Muslims as deeply offensive, even blasphemous. Yet the violent response by extremists not only cost lives but also deepened divisions, reinforcing stereotypes about Islam and undermining efforts to build bridges between communities. This tragic episode underscores the importance of defending freedom of expression, even—and especially—when it is uncomfortable.

2. Challenges for Muslims: blasphemy, religious offence and dialogue

For many Muslims, the concept of blasphemy is not merely a theological issue; it is a deeply emotional one. The idea that someone could insult the Prophet Muhammad or mock the Qur'an feels like a personal attack, a violation of something sacred. This sensitivity is rooted in a long history of reverence for religious symbols and figures, emerging in a cultural context where honour and faith are closely intertwined.

Yet within Islam itself, there are rich intellectual and theological resources for navigating this tension. These resources, often overlooked or underemphasised in contemporary debates, provide a potential for crafting a future that is different to what we have seen in recent years.

a) The Qur'anic creation story: freedom as divine gift

According to the narrative of the Qur'an freedom is the very essence of the human spirit. It is free will that differentiated humanity from the angels at the point of creation. And even when the angels suggested that (as a result) man would "make mischief (on the earth) and shed blood," God replied, "I know that which you do not" – thus giving divine license to this unique aspect of his creation and acknowledging that while freedom may lead to corruption, it is only through the exercise of free will that the human spirit can reach the heights for which it was intended.

This is why, contrary to popular belief, the Qur'an asserts that there should be "no compulsion" in faith. A Qur'anic ethic of free will suggests that coercion – whether political, ideological or religious – runs counter to divine intent. The opportunity to believe can only be truly realised and valued when there is also an opportunity to disbelieve.

This theological foundation suggests that freedom is not merely a Western value but a divine gift, integral to what it means to be human. The Qur'an repeatedly emphasises the importance of reason, reflection and choice. For example, *"And say, 'The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills—let him believe; and whoever wills—let him disbelieve.'"*

b) Ibn Tufayl and human nature

The Andalusian Muslim polymath, Ibn Tufayl (d. 1185) provides another important resource for understanding the Islamic tradition of human agency and autonomy. In his philosophical novel *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (literally, *Alive, Son of Awake*), Ibn Tufayl tells the story of a self-taught young man (stranded on an island) who discovers truth through reason and observation, without the guidance of religion or society. The protagonist, Hayy, embodies the idea that humans are capable of using their intellect to understand the world and their place within it.

The Qur'an itself asks people to look at the creation around them and come to recognise God. Traditional Islamic sources thus referred to two types of 'books' that could be read: the revealed book (the Qur'an) and the 'book' of nature (God's on-going revelation). Another important consideration in this regard is that the Islamic notion of the *fitra* – the innate nature of human beings – implies that all human beings carry within them an element of the divine breath. The *fitra*, thus propels human beings towards good and this allows all of humanity, religious or not, to share some level of common humanity – aspirations, outlooks, values and an intrinsic sense of good and evil. It is then no accident that human beings can come together to share common values and *live* together. The *fitra* naturally allows us to rise above any cultural or religious specificities.

Importantly, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* had a profound influence on European thinkers. The novel was translated into Latin by Edward Pococke in 1671 (titled, *Philosophus Autodidactus*) and then into English by Simon Ockley in 1708 (as, *The Improvement of Human Reason*). The text had a major impact on thinkers such as Locke (d. 1704) (who was a student of Pococke) and his idea of the *tabula rasa* as well as on theories of empiricism that developed in Western thought.

c) Ibn Rushd and the synthesis of reason and faith

Ibn Rushd (d. 1198), known in the West as Averroes, is another important figure in the Islamic philosophical tradition. Ibn Rushd is best known for his defence of reason and his argument that philosophy and religion are complementary paths to truth and that reason is a gift from God, essential for understanding creation.

Ibn Rushd's ideas also had a lasting impact on European thought, particularly during the Renaissance and Enlightenment. His commentaries on Aristotle were studied widely in medieval Europe and his emphasis on reason and evidence influenced thinkers like Thomas Aquinas. This cross-cultural exchange underscores the interconnectedness of Islamic and Western intellectual traditions.

d) Mustafa Akyol and the case for Islam and liberty

Mustafa Akyol, a contemporary Turkish writer and scholar, has been a vocal advocate for reconciling Islam with liberal values. In his book *Islam Without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, Akyol argues that Islam's early history was marked by a spirit of pluralism and intellectual curiosity. He traces the roots of authoritarianism and intolerance in the Muslim world not to the Qur'an itself but to later historical developments, particularly the rise of rigid legal schools and the suppression of rationalist thought.

Akyol highlights historic schools of thought, which flourished during the Islamic Golden Age and emphasised reason, free will and the compatibility of faith and science. Akyol also points to the Ottoman Empire's millet system, which allowed religious minorities to govern themselves according to their own laws, as an example of Islamic pluralism in practice.

Akyol represents a strand of modern Islamic thought that is part of a wider project. For instance, Muhammad Abduh (d. 1905) argued that Islam upholds a clear distinction between the 'religious' and 'worldly', paving the way for a more secular understanding. Allama Iqbal (d. 1938) argued for a 'reconstruction of religious thought in Islam' and Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) was one of the foremost critical thinkers of our time when it came to engaging with the subject of Islam and modernity. Amongst such thinkers working at the interface of Islam and modernity another important arena of development is the growing body of Islamic feminist critiques of patriarchy in Muslim societies and history.

e) Abdullah bin Bayyah: bridging tradition and modernity

Coming from a more traditional perspective Shaykh Abdullah bin Bayyah has addressed the subject of freedom of expression and has written extensively on topics like countering extremism, conflict resolution, Islamic legal theory and coexistence.

With roles such as being President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, based in Abu Dhabi, and a former Vice President of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, bin Bayyah is often seen as a bridge between traditional Islamic scholarship and modern challenges. In the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo incident in France (2015), bin Bayyah was one of the scholars who called for restraint and peaceful advocacy, emphasizing that Islam teaches believers to rise above provocations and seek justice through lawful and ethical means. For bin Bayyah, freedom of expression is an area where Muslims must balance modern legal frameworks with Islamic ethics, promoting peace, dignity, and wisdom in public discourse. He has been vocal in condemning violent reactions to religiously offensive speech and stresses that while Muslims may feel hurt or offended, the response should align with Islamic legal principles and the Prophet's model of mercy and patience, rather than resorting to violence.

Bin Bayyah thus acknowledges the importance of freedom of expression as a foundational element of modern societies, but he emphasises that in Islam, freedom is not absolute; it is balanced by ethical considerations such as respect for others, the avoidance of slander, and the prevention of social discord (*fitna*). Some of his notable works and documents such as the *Marrakesh Declaration* include discussions on *maqasid* (the objectives of Islamic law and ethics), where he argues for prioritizing peace and human dignity.

f) Matthew Melvin-Koushki and the Abrahamic-Hellenic Synthesis

Matthew Melvin-Koushki, a contemporary academic, has proposed the idea of the Abrahamic-Hellenic synthesis, which describes the blending of Greek philosophy and Abrahamic theology in the medieval Islamic world. According to Melvin-Koushki this synthesis, which gave rise to the Islamic Golden Age, laid the groundwork for many of the values we associate with modernity, including the importance of reason, evidence, and intellectual inquiry. He thus argues that Western values emerged not in isolation but through a dialogue with Islamic philosophy. This challenges the narrative that freedom, democracy, and human rights are exclusively Western inventions. Instead, it suggests that these values are the product of a shared intellectual history, in which Muslim thinkers played a crucial role.

When British Muslims today struggle with questions of modernity, they are not confronting a foreign, Western ideology. They are, in a sense, engaging with a tradition their own intellectual forebears helped to craft. Earlier generations of Muslims were open to critical thinking, philosophy, reasoning and learning from all around them – Greek, Persian, Indian and other heritage – that they were able to create a profound legacy of art, philosophy, science and mathematics. So much so that our Western numerical digits are still called the 'Arabic Numeral System'. For British Muslims, this perspective can, and should, be empowering. It demonstrates that Islam has always been part of the broader human quest for knowledge and understanding. By reclaiming this heritage, Muslims can contribute to the ongoing conversation about freedom and modernity, challenging both anti-Western extremists and those who deny Islam's compatibility with liberal values.

3. Freedom and human rights

Freedom of expression underpins other liberties, including human rights protections for minorities. Britain's commitment to LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality and racial justice stems from this foundational freedom. However, British Muslims are navigating these complex legacies in an environment fraught with challenges. Some feel squeezed between a Western secularism that can appear dismissive of their faith and a conservative interpretation of Islam that discourages dissent and diversity. For many, this results in a profound identity crisis.

The key is to recognise that freedom of expression and human rights are not about imposing a single worldview but about creating a space where divergent worldviews are able to coexist, be in conversation and live in peace. This means that conservative Muslims have the right to hold and express their beliefs, just as – for example – LGBT+ individuals have the right to live openly and without fear of discrimination or harm. It also means confronting the reality that the two terms 'Muslim' and 'LGBT+' are not as separate as we may always imagine. How does a religion, whose basic mantra begins 'In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful' (*Bismilllah al-Rahman al-Rahim*) show these qualities to all of its children, regardless of sexuality?

And across the UK, there are signs of new conversations. Younger British Muslims are increasingly engaging in critical discourse about faith, politics and freedom. Muslim groups, online platforms, and community initiatives are debating questions once considered taboo. As we can also see above, figures from very different parts of the Islamic spectrum have publicly championed freedom of thought and human rights within Islam, challenging both the far-right narrative that Islam is fundamentally alien and the Islamist narrative that Britain can never be a home for Muslims. This intra-community pluralism is essential. It signals that British Islam is a work in progress, and is evolving, often in surprising ways.

This is not an easy balance to strike, but it is essential for social cohesion. When freedom of expression is used as a weapon to demean or dehumanise others, it undermines the very values it is meant to protect. But when it is used as a tool for dialogue and understanding, it can help bridge divides and build a more inclusive society. But freedom means freedom for everyone. The right to critique Islam exists alongside the right of Muslims to defend it.

4. The consequences of getting it wrong

The stakes of this debate could not be higher. If we fail to reconcile freedom of expression with religious sensitivity, the consequences will be dire. Extremists on both sides—Muslim extremists and those on the far right—will exploit these tensions to sow division and hatred. Young British Muslims, caught between competing identities, will feel alienated and disempowered, making them more vulnerable to radicalisation. Extremism thrives in environments where dialogue is stifled, where grievances are ignored, and where identity is weaponised. By contrast, social cohesion is a powerful tool for resilience. It creates a sense of belonging, a shared commitment to common values, and a willingness to engage with difference. Freedom of expression is not just a legal safeguard; it is a tool of resilience. It is the mechanism by which communities air grievances, debate values and negotiate difference.

The intellectual resources within Islam—from the Qur'anic emphasis on human autonomy to the philosophical legacies of Ibn Tufayl and Ibn Rushd—provide a rich foundation for reconciling faith with freedom of expression. Yet these traditions are often overshadowed by more rigid and authoritarian interpretations of Islam, which dominate public discourse both within and outside Muslim communities. At the same time, it requires non-Muslims to recognise the diversity of Islamic thought and to challenge the stereotypes that portray Islam as inherently illiberal.

The challenge for British Muslims is to reclaim and amplify these voices, demonstrating that Islam is not a monolithic or static tradition but a dynamic and diverse one. This requires engaging with contemporary scholars who are reinterpreting Islamic teachings for the modern world, as well as creating spaces for dialogue and debate within Muslim communities. It also means creating spaces where Muslims and non-Muslims can come together to discuss difficult issues, from blasphemy to LGBT+ rights, in a spirit of mutual respect and understanding. The future depends on getting this balance right. It means embracing freedom of expression not as a threat but as an opportunity. This is not easy, but it is necessary.

Those on the extremes do not passively await the collapse of social solidarity and cohesion – they often work to actively engineer it. Whether through online propaganda, spreading false information or exaggerating things out of context, they exploit grievances, real or perceived. A society that embraces (genuine) open dialogue and free expression should – in theory – be more resilient. When people feel heard and included, they are less likely to be swayed by those who offer simplistic, binary worldviews. But our recent history has shown that we need to get smarter as open societies at exercising free expression, especially online.

Online platforms have shown how they are open to new forms of manipulation. Social media allows anyone to share opinions, yet this openness can be exploited to spread misinformation, amplify extremist views and erode public trust. Bad actors, including state-sponsored groups and coordinated bots have been seen to weaponise free speech by flooding platforms with divisive content deliberately designed to create social anxiety and polarise communities.

Algorithms – and those with the money and influence to manipulate them – play a crucial role in this process. Designed to maximise user engagement, they often prioritise sensational, emotionally charged, or controversial content. As a result, posts that provoke anger, fear, or outrage tend to gain more visibility, regardless of their accuracy or intent. This dynamic encourages the rapid spread of hateful rhetoric and disinformation, deepening societal divides. Echo chambers and filter bubbles emerge, where users are repeatedly exposed to one-sided narratives, reinforcing biases and fostering hostility toward opposing views.

We have seen the impact of this in the UK, during recent election campaigns, the riots last Summer and also manifested as ethnic and religious tensions on a wider scale, for example between Hindu and Muslim communities in Leicester. As the world stands at the cusp of much further technological developments as computing power expands, and particularly advancements in the field of AI, the likelihood of things getting worse before they become better is significant.

This presents yet another fundamental challenge for our species to come together and maturely and soberly address. We will need to find new structures and ethics for living together online, new ways of ascertaining fact from fiction, balancing freedom with responsibility.

Conclusion: a call for empathy, courage and optimism

This essay is not merely a challenge to Muslims uncomfortable with certain aspects of Western liberalism. It is also addressed to those who view Islam as forever at odds with modernity. Islam is neither inherently anti-modern nor inherently liberal. It is a vast, diverse tradition that contains within it the potentials for both authoritarianism and freedom. It is human. Which path British Islam takes will depend on whether Muslims – and wider society – create the conditions for open, honest dialogue.

In a world where extreme ideas and narratives can seem to dominate headlines, it is easy to forget that most Muslims – in Britain and beyond – are already living this delicate balance. Freedom of expression is not just a legal principle; it is a moral one. It is the foundation of a society where diversity is celebrated, where dialogue is possible and where everyone has a voice. For British Muslims, this is a moment of both challenge and opportunity. By engaging with the intellectual resources within their own tradition, by embracing the values of freedom and human rights, and by building bridges with other communities, they can help shape a future where Islam is not just tolerated but valued as part of the UK's rich tapestry.

Discussions around freedom of speech are an important aspect of the cultural negotiation that Muslims are undertaking and we can see important shifts taking place between generations. Starting the conversation from hard positions on either side – "freedom to offend", or "the book must be banned" – has not helped at all. We need a genuine willingness to listen, to bear in mind cultural starting points and ultimately, perhaps even ironically, only a climate of free debate and discussion can help the conversation along. Furthermore, the cultural environment in Britain (and the broader West) is one in which humour, art, literature are powerful tools for expression. Rather than being dismissed they should be embraced – as so many British

Muslims are now doing. Being able to laugh at oneself is a very British way of expressing self-confidence and those unable to do so are seen to be nervous and possibly having something to hide.

Negotiating this hugely important and delicate subject is not a task for Muslims alone. It is a task for all of us. It requires courage, empathy and a willingness to confront complex scenarios that don't always have (easy) answers. But if we can rise to the challenge, the rewards will be immense: a society where freedom and faith coexist, where diversity is a strength and where everyone has a place at the table. Because freedom is not the enemy of faith. It is its most vital ally.

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