Mehdi Hasan’s Oxford University Debate

Thank you very much mister President. Ladies and gentleman, good evening, as-salamu alaykum, lovely to see you all here tonight. We are having a very entertaining night, are we not? With some very interesting things being said from the other side of the House tonight.

Let me begin by saying as a Muslim, as a representative of Islam, I would consider myself an ambassador for Islam, a believer in Islam, a follower of Islam and its prophets. So, in that capacity, let me begin by apologising to Anne-Marie for the Bali bombings, I apologise for the role of my religion, me and my people for the killing of Theo Van Gough, for 7/7. Yes, that was all of us. That was Islam, that was Muslims, that was the Quran. I mean, astonishing, astonishing claims to make in the very first speech on a day like today, where the Conservative Prime Minister of the United Kingdom is having to come out and point out that these kind of views are anathema, and I believe you’re trying to stand for the Labour Party and to become an M.P. in Brighton; if you do, and you make these comments, I’m guessing you’ll have the whip withdrawn from you; but then again, UKIP’s on the rise, they’ll take you. The BNP, they might have something to say about your views.

By the way, these are the factual points, as we heard a lot about second speaker, about how backward we Muslim all are. On a factual point, you said the Islam was born in Saudi Arabia. Islam was born in 610 AD, and Saudi Arabia was born in 1932 AD. So you’re only 1,322 years off. Not bad, not a bad start there. Talking of maths, by the way, a man named Al-Qawarizmi was one of the greatest mathematicians of all time. A Muslim, worked in the Golden Age of Islam. He’s the guy who came up with not just algebra, but algorithms; without algorithms, you wouldn't have laptops; without laptops, Daniel Johnson tonight wouldn't have been able to print out his speech, in which he came to berate us Muslims for holding back the advanced and intellectual achievements of the West, which all happened without any contribution from anyone else other than the Judeo-Christian people of Europe. In fact, Daniel David Levering, the author of -- the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian and author of God’s Crucible, pointed out that there would be no Renaissance – there would be no Reformation in Europe without the role played by Ibn e Sina, Ibn e Rushd -- some of the great Muslim theologians, philosophers, scientists, and bringing peace to Europe.

As for “this being our university,” I will leave that to the imagination as to who is “our” and who is “their.” I studied here, too.

An astonishing, astonishing set of speeches so far, making this case tonight. A mixture of just cherry-picked quotes, facts, and figures, self-serving, selective, a farrago of distortions, misrepresentations, misinterpretations, misquotations. Daniel talked about my article in the New Statesman, which got me a lot of flak, where I talked about the anti-Semitism that is prevalent in some parts of the Muslim community, which indeed it is. Of course, I didn’t say in that piece that it was caused by the religion of Islam. In fact, modern anti-Semitism in the Middle East was imported from -- finish the sentence -- Christian, Judeo Christian Europe, where I believe some certain bad things happened to the Jewish people. In fact, Tom Friedman, Jewish-American columnist in The New York Times told me in this very chamber last week, that he believed had Muslims been running Europe in the 1940s, 6 million extra Jews would still be alive today. So I'm not going to take lessons in anti-Semitism from someone who’s here to defend the Judeo-Christian values of a continent who murdered of six million Jews.

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I don’t think Europe is evil or bad. I’m a very proud European. I don’t want to judge Europe on that basis, but if we're going to play this gutter game where we pull out the Bali Bombing, and we pull out examples of anti-Semitism in the Islamic community, then of course I'm going to come back and say, “well, hold on!” I mean, look, let's be very clear. Daniel here was a last minute replacement for Douglas Murray who had to pull out, and Douglas and I have well-documented differences. But to be fair to Douglas, to be fair to Anna-Marie and to Peter -- atheists. Atheists see all religions as evil, violent, threatening. What the problem I have with Daniel’s speech is that Daniel comes here to rant this robust defense of Christianity, forgetting that his fellow Christians, people who said they were acting in the name of Jesus, gave us the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, the anti-Jewish pogroms, European colonialism in Africa and Asia, the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, not to mention countless arson and bomb attacks on abortion clinics in the United States of America to this very day. I would like a little bit of humility from Daniel first, before he begins lecturing other communities and other faiths on violence, terror, and intolerance.

But I would say this to address the gentleman's very valid point here; I'm not going to play that game. I don't actually believe that Christianity is a religion of violence and hate because of what the LRA does in Uganda, or what Crusaders did to Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem when they took Mecca City in the 12th, or 13th -- whatever century it was. I believe that Christianity, like Islam, like pretty much every mainstream religion, is based on love, and compassion, and faith. I do follow a religion in which 113 out of the 114 chapters of the Quran begin by introducing the God of Islam as a God of mercy and compassion. I would not have it any other way. I don’t follow a religion which introduces my God to me as a God of War, as some kind of Greek God of Wrath, as a God of Hate and Injustice. Not at all. As Adam pointed out, you go through the Quran and you see the mercy, and the love, and the justice; and yes, you have verses that refer to warfare and violence -- of course it does. This is not a motion about pacifism, and I’m not here to argue that Islam is a pacifistic faith. It is not. Islam allows military action, violence in certain limited context; and yes, a minority of Muslims do take it out of that context. But is it religious?

We talked about [the attack in] Woolwich; Daniel and Anne-Marie have suggested that it's definitely religion that's behind all of this. Well, actually, what I find so amusing tonight, because we’re having a debate about Islam, and the opposition tonight have come forward: we have a graduate in law, a graduate in modern history, a graduate in chemistry, and you know I admire all of their intellects and their abilities, but we don’t have anyone who is actually an expert on Islam, a scholar of Islam, a historian of Islam, a speaker of Arabic, even a terrorism expert, or a security expert, or a pollster, let alone to talk about what Muslims believe or think. Instead, we have people coming here, putting forward these views, putting forward these sweeping opinions. Listen to Professor Robert Pape of the University of Chicago, one of America's leading terrorism experts, who, unlike our esteemed opposition tonight, studied every single case of suicide terrorism between 1980 and 2005 -- 315 cases in total -- and he concluded, and I quote, “there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism or any of the world’s religions. Rather what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal to compell modern democracies, to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists considered to be their homeland.”
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And the irony is -- when we talk about terrorism -- the irony is that the opposition and the Muslim terrorists, the al-Qaida-types, actually have one thing in common, because they both believe that Islam is a war-like, violent religion. They both agree on that. They have everything in common. Osama bin Laden would be nodding along to everything we hear tonight from the opposition, that he agrees with them. The problem is that mainstream Muslims don't; the majority of Muslims around the world don't. In fact, a gentleman here has started quoting all sorts of polls; Gallop carried out the biggest poll of Muslims around all 50,000 Muslims in 35 countries. 93% of Muslims rejected 9/11 and suicide attacks, and of the 7% who didn't -- they all were polled and focus-grouped -- cited political reasons for their support for violence, not religious reasons.

And as for Islamic scholars and what they say, well, Daniel talks about “our University of Oxford;” well, go down to Oxford Center for Islamic Studies, get hold of a man named Sheikh Afify Al-Akitil, who is a massively well-credentialed and well-respected Islamic scholar, who has studied across the world, who in the days after 7/7 published a fatwa denouncing terrorism in the name of Islam, calling for the protection of all non-combatants at all times, and describing suicide bombings as an innovation with no basis in Islamic law. Go and listen to Sheikh Tahirul Qadri, one of Pakistan's most famous Islamic scholars, who published a 600-page fatwa, condemning the killing of all innocence and all suicide bombers unconditionally without any ifs or buts. There's nothing new here: this is mainstream Islam, mainstream scholarship. We just said this for years: you don't go out and kill people willy-nilly in the high street or anywhere else, on a bus or a mall, based on verses of the Quran that you cherry-pick without any context, any understanding, any interpretation, or any commentary.

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A lot of us a lot of us are campaigning against that, and we're campaigning against it in the name of Islam, we're campaigning against it in the name of various interpretations of Islam. Ann-Marie comes and scares us with her talk of Sharia Law. I would like to see the book of Sharia Law -- it doesn't exist. People argue over what Sharia Law is, and you empower the extremists by saying there is only one version; you empower them all.

Here's what we're dealing with: a 1,400 year old global religion, followed by 1.6 billion people in every corner of the world, a quarter of humanity, of all backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities; and yet the opposition tonight wants to generalise, stereotype, smear, in order to desperately win this debate.

And here's my question, if we're going to generalize and smear: if -- okay, people say yesterday's bombers -- and we've got to be careful, there's a trial going on -- were yesterday's attackers motivated by Islam? Big debate -- I don't believe they were -- let's say they were. Let's say Faisal Shahzad, the Times Square bomber, was motivated by Islam. Let's assume for sake of argument, that Richard Reeves, the Shoe Bomber was motivated by Islam. If Islam is responsible for these killers, if Islam is what is motivating those people, and Islam is therefore not a religion of peace but a religion of war, then ask yourself this question: why aren't the rest of us doing it? Why is it such a tiny minority of Muslims are interpreting their religion in the way that the opposition claim they are?
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Let’s assume there are 16,000 suicide bombers in the world – there aren’t -- let’s assume there are, for the sake of argument. That’s 0.001% of the Muslim population globally. What about the other 99.99% of Muslims, who the opposition tonight either ignore or smear? The reality is that the rest of us aren’t blowing ourselves up tonight, the reality is that the opposition came here tonight, not worried about the fact that me and Adam might pull open our jackets to blow ourselves up tonight because we’re followers of a war-like warrior religion, which wants to take over Europe and Daniel’s University [of Oxford].

The issue is this: unless the opposition can tell us tonight, and Peter Atkins is here -- one of our great atheist intellectuals – unless they can answer this question tonight, why don’t the vast majority of Muslims around the world behave as violently and aggressively as a tiny minority of politically motivated extremists, then they might as well give up and stop pretending they have anything relevant to say about Islam or Muslims as a whole.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me just say this to you. Think about what the opposite of this motion is. If you vote NO tonight, think about what you’re saying the opposite of this motion is. That Islam isn’t a religion of peace, it’s a religion of war, of violence, of terror, of aggression; that the people who follow Islam – me, my wife, my retired parents, my six-year-old child -- that 1.8 million of your fellow British residents and citizens and 1.6 billion people across the world, your fellow human beings, are all followers, promoters, believers in a religion of violence. Do you really think that? Do you really believe that to be the case? They say that in the Oxford Union, the most famous debate was in 1933, when Adolf Hitler looked out for the result of the King and Country Motion, where they voted against fighting for King and Country, and Hitler was listening out for the result. Well, tonight 80 years on, there are two groups of people around the world who I would argue are waiting for the result of tonight’s vote. There are the millions of peaceful, non-violent, law-abiding Muslims both in the UK, Europe, Asia, Africa, and beyond, who see Islam as the source of their identity, as a source of spiritual fulfillment, of hope, of solace. And there are the phobes, the haters, the bigots out there, who want to push the clash of civilizations, who want to divide all of us into “them” and “us” and “ours” and “their.”

Ladies and gentlemen, I urge you all not to fuel the arguments of the phobes and bigots. Don’t legitimate their divisions, don’t legitimize their hate. Trust those Muslims who you know, who you’ve met, who you hear, who don’t believe in violence, who do want you to hear the peaceful message of the Quran as they believe it to be taught to the majority of Muslims: the Islam of peace, and compassion, and mercy; the Islam of the Quran, not of al-Qaeda. Ladies and gentlemen, I beg to propose this Motion to the House. I urge you to vote YES tonight. Thank you very much for your time.
Debate: This House believes Islam is a religion of peace

By Rachel Goddard-Bernstein

- **Ayes**: 286
- **Noes**: 168

In a timely debate, held just 24 hours after the religiously motivated incident in Woolwich, the Union considered the question of the nature of Islam. Proposition speaker Matthew Handley started the debate by grounding it in recent events, deploiring the previous day’s “reprehensible act in Woolwich”, a sentiment that he was sure would be shared by Muslims around the world. Handley continued by separating the religion of Islam from the individuals who “violently hijack faith for violent and maniacal ends” and maintained that the Qur’an has an “overwhelmingly peaceful character.” In the light of the “decade long surge of violence and aggression” against Islam since 9/11, he summarised the debate as a choice between “love and hate and rejection, peace and conflict” and concluded: “I hope you make the right choice.”

Speaker Anne-Marie Waters, council member of the National Secular Society, began the case for the opposition by denying that she and her fellow opposition speakers cause fear of Islam and blamed instead “the actions of Islam itself”. She listed “9/11, 7/7, Mali, Somalia, gender discrimination, forced marriages, polygamy, amputation”, and many more. To the opposition’s claim that these acts belong to an “extreme fringe” which has misunderstood the words of the Qur’an, she described the executions for blasphemy and apostasy in Saudi Arabia, and asked “has there ever been a more spectacular misunderstanding?” Waters concluded by arguing that it is the moderate Muslims who must “dance around meanings” and “stretch interpretations” when confronted with the fundamentally violent ideology of the Qur’an.

Adam Deen, a prominent Muslim intellectual and founder and director of the Deen Institute, countered this by arguing that “if we approach Islamic teaching fairly and objectively, there is a golden thread that runs through whole Qur’an,” an ideal of “justice” and “positive peace.” He argued that in fact the whole of Islam is compatible with “just war theory”, in which “the virtue of avoiding violence is superseded by the virtue of justice.” He then quoted from the Qur’an which states: “Fight in God’s cause but do not overstep the limits. God does not love those who overstep the limits.”

Daniel Johnston, journalist and editor of what he called the “not very right-wing” magazine Standpoint, called Islam “the most direct threat to Western civilization in the world today”. Johnston deplored the lack of “freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, equal rights, and separation between church and state” in Islamic countries, emphasizing that “all these ideals emerged in the West.” Johnston claimed that a university like Oxford, with its tradition of free academic inquiry, could not exist under the conditions of an Islamic state and that “there is no university in this sense in the Islamic world”.

Muslim journalist Mehdi Hasan, political editor of the Huffington Post, warned Anne-Marie Waters that her “astonishing claims” might endanger her future as a Labour Party candidate, but assured her “don’t worry, the BNP will take you”. Hasan asked why, if Islam is “responsible for killing,” such a tiny percentage of believers actually participate in violence. He asked the audience if they really believe that 1.6 billion people are all “followers, promoters and believers in a religion of violence”. Hasan urged them not to “fuel the arguments of the
phobes and bigots and legitimise hate”, but to “trust the Muslims that you know and that you hear.”

Opposition speaker Peter Atkins, former Professor of Chemistry at Oxford, concluded the debate by describing Islam along with all other religions as a “supermarket of ideas and instructions” from which good and bad men can select what they want “according to their taste.” However, he claimed that Islam “does in practice inspire more violence than the other Abrahamic religions”. Taking on Adam Deen’s metaphor of a ‘golden thread’, he argued that “the opposite of peace is woven into the fabric of the Qur’an.” Atkins declared that “all the seas incarnadine cannot wash the blood from a religion’s hands”, because “when evils destroy a human life, as they did yesterday, that life cannot be restored”. He called on the audience to oppose the motion “for the sake of humanity.”