A Cumberland Colloquium

Moving Beyond “Us” and “Them”
Challenging Discourses of Religious Otherness and Building a More Inclusive Society

1st June 2015

Conference Summary

The colloquium was kindly supported by:

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GUEST SPEAKERS

Prof. Martyn Barrett (public lecture)
Emeritus Professor of Psychology
University of Surrey

Suniya Qureshi (keynote speech)
CEO, Qismat Foundation

ORGANISING COMMITTEE

Dr Teresa Whitney (Principal Organiser)
London School of Economics (Department of Social Psychology)

Dr Jawiria Naseem (Co-Principal Organiser)
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PhD candidate
London School of Economics

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PANEL SPEAKERS

Rosalind Birtwistle
Co-Founder, Interfaith Marriage Network

Dr. Leda Blackwood
University of St. Andrews

Aidan Cottrell-Boyce
Faculty of Divinity Cambridge

Dr Mike Diboll
Leader of the Secondary Teachers Education Programme at the Institute of Ismaili Studies

Dr Reza Gholami
Middlesex University, London

Catriona Robertson
London Boroughs Faiths Network

Revd Dr James Walters
LSE Faith Centre
Throughout the day, presentations and discussions centred around two main themes:

- Moving beyond through ‘a celebration of similarities’
- Thinking critically: redefining spaces for education and education beyond schooling

The first theme that emerged called on the need to focus on perceiving our society as one group, and while there is a need to respect and acknowledge our differences, we must also celebrate our similarities. Furthermore, there must be a critical dissection of the definition of national identity labels such as ‘British’ in order to make room for multiple meanings that encompass the various ethnicities, religions and groups that make up our society.

Relating to the first theme, the second theme highlighted the importance of equipping young people in particular with the skills to develop critical thinking to challenge ‘us’ and ‘them’ narratives. Indeed, in order to do this there was acknowledgement for the need to create spaces of learning that encourage and nurture critical thinking beyond the school setting and negotiate difference respectfully.

A closing session was then held to allow speakers and delegates to collectively reflect on the day’s discussions.

To end the day, Martyn Barrett, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Surrey was the second and final keynote speaker. In his talk he examined two policy approaches to cultural diversity: multiculturalism and interculturalism. In focusing on the latter, Barrett reported on a new educational initiative by the Council of Europe which aims to equip young people with the skills needed to effectively engage in intercultural dialogue through the use of a reference framework of intercultural and democratic competences, and explores what it can offer towards making societies more inclusive across Europe.
INTRODUCTION

“Moving Beyond ‘Us’ and ‘Them’: Challenging Discourses of Religious Otherness and Building a More Inclusive Society” was a one-day event held as part of the Cumberland Lodge Colloquia programme. This programme provides early career researchers with the opportunity to organise an interdisciplinary, inter-institutional conference to address an issue of contemporary ethical relevance and facilitate conversations that might not otherwise happen within traditional academic settings.

This report provides a summary of the presentations and discussions that took place during the conference as well as the main themes that emerged during the day’s events. The conference was organised by Teresa Whitney (LSE), Jawiria Naseem (UCL), Amena Amer (LSE), and Eleni Andreouli (Open University), with financial support from the Islamic Centre of England.

The colloquium set out to challenge the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide that pervades public debate regarding religious ‘others,’ and discuss ways to build a society that is more cohesive and inclusive. We took an interdisciplinary approach, bringing together academics and students from the social sciences and humanities, as well as practitioners who have direct experience in community work. Our intention was to bring together a range of perspectives, both academic and non-academic, in order to consolidate knowledge and identify not just issues to tackle, but also new ways to address them together. Contributors discussed issues of identity, inclusion and constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them’, reflected on the notion of citizenship in multicultural and multi-faith societies, and explored how educating the younger generations can act as a driver for social change.

The 36 delegates came from a range of academic and professional backgrounds: psychology, sociology, theology, higher education, government, media, and the non-profit sector. They included 4 students, from sociology, politics and education.
Recent events have brought religion to the forefront of political debates and increased anxieties in the United Kingdom and other western countries. For example, questions around the compatibility of Islam with British identity, fears of ‘Islamist terrorism’ (e.g. in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks), the ongoing Syria crisis, the ‘Trojan Horse’ schools controversy and the debate over the failure of multiculturalism, have made religion a contentious issue in the UK and elsewhere. Commentators and researchers have noted an increased fear of religious ‘others’, particularly Muslims, coupled with xenophobia and claims for more similarity, cohesion and assimilation. In this context of a heightened ‘us vs. them’ narrative, it becomes imperative to explore the ways in which we can encourage intergroup dialogue in order to promote a peaceful and just society based on mutual respect and cross-cultural understanding.

Towards this aim, the conference sought to provide a forum to challenge the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide between communities, with a focus on interfaith dialogue. The conference contributed to our understanding of the barriers as well as the possibilities for intergroup dialogue and building more inclusive and equal societies – in which the voices of Muslim and other minority religious groups are not simply ‘tolerated’ but recognised. Each panel discussed these issues in relation to the following themes:

- **Panel 1: Engaging in Difficult Dialogues: the Constructions of ‘Us’ and ‘Them’**: In this session delegates explored the difficulties related to facilitating dialogue amongst and between diverse cultural, ethnic, and religious groups. They also reflected on ways in which to improve dialogue between groups.

- **Panel 2: Can ‘You’ and ‘I’ become ‘We’?**: Negotiating Belonging in a Multicultural Society: In this session, delegates discussed issues relating to belonging and non-belonging in a multicultural society, focusing on ways in which religious identities are contested and negotiated.

- **Panel 3: Uncertain Futures: Youth Education as a Driver for Social Change**: In this theme, presentations centered on the role that young people play in driving social change and the need for formal and informal education to provide them with tools for critical thinking.
Broken Identities: Being a Muslim in Contemporary Britain

Suniya Qureshi

‘Does Britishness leave British Pakistanis with a sense of broken identity?’ This was the provoking question Suniya Qureshi, our first guest speaker, asked the audience as she opened the day’s debate.

Based on an individual’s religion – Islam in Qureshi’s discussion – one cannot be more or less British than any other individual. This statement was framed within the current socio-political events that are rapidly changing the world as we know it. Violence witnessed across the world, through the actions of groups such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), is by no means representative of the larger groups of people who adhere to Islam. Yet, attitudes and perceptions of Muslims are marginalising the average Muslim citizen in the UK. As a result, Qureshi argued there is now a disconnect, which has shut doors for any form of dialogue between and across groups in the UK. She further argued that more and more young British Muslims are becoming disengaged from the mainstream due an ingrained mistrust in part because of the Prevent programme, a sense of apathy due to foreign policy failures, and removal of government services in their local areas. Qureshi then described the attraction of groups like ISIS among young British Muslims and linked it to the failing of preventative policies and foreign interventions (such as the Iraq war).

This introduction led Qureshi into asking a critical question, one that was brought up throughout the day: how can social engagement be revived, especially among young people? Bringing back positive images about Muslims within mainstream society is essential. This, Qureshi suggested, would enable young Muslims to be confident in expressing their multiple identities, including their national and religious identities. This would offer young people a space for re-claiming their religion from misperceptions and distrust.

Before concluding, Qureshi went back to the title of her presentation. There is no such thing as broken identity, she stated, but there is now widespread belief in the incompatibility between Britishness and Muslimness. This incompatibility needs to be challenged in order to bridge the gap between different sections of the society. Focusing on a common sense of belonging, Qureshi suggested, is a first step forward as it will show that Britishness can hold multiple meanings to reflect different groups’ positions in society. Britishness is not a singular but a plural concept.

Qureshi concluded her presentation by acknowledging the difficulties associated with reviving dialogue across groups and connecting individuals with the reality of their social world. But these difficulties, she argued, should be read as an opportunity to bring about positive change. Each and every individual, as citizens of this country, is responsible for making change happen.

Following the presentation, Qureshi took questions from the audience. The hour-long exchange revolved around two main points: the disengagement of young people and the importance of focusing on similarities rather than differences. These points developed into a discussion of current issues regarding the travel of young people to Syria to fight alongside ISIS. Delegates were interested in considering how radicalisation could be tackled. Although there was no clear answer to this complex situation, delegates opened up new lines of thoughts. First, Qureshi highlighted the tremendous tension we are witnessing regarding the ‘usurpation’ of Islam. She argued that there is a polarisation of Islam which leaves young people with binary allegiances and unable to nurture multiple identities. Qureshi suggested that there is a need to ‘reclaim the narrative’ by focusing on shared popular culture such as language, food, music and clothing to highlight what binds us together in our everyday life. ‘Reclaiming the narrative’ is also about removing negativity from how Islam is portrayed so that young people can feel comfortable with who they are and not be subject of fear, hate and/or stereotypes.

A few delegates also raised the issue of revisiting current governmental initiatives in tackling radicalisation. Qureshi stated that attempts to
control religion are not the solution. Assimilation of religion or imposing what is acceptable and not acceptable about Islam (from the government and other institutions) means leaving young people’s voices unheard. As a result, the more young people’s sense of freedom is taken away, the more they will disconnect from the society they live in. The discussion concluded with an important comment by Qureshi on freedom of expression and how this fundamental right is under attack because of lack of trust and dialogue across groups and institutions. The topic of young people’s engagement with the society they live in was continued during the third panel discussion.

Our first panel session explored how self-other categorizations and social constructions of in- and out-groups impact upon intra- and inter-group dialogue. Dr Teresa Whitney, (Department of Social Psychology, The London School of Economics) whose research examines the conditions that facilitate and hinder multicultural interfaith dialogue, served as the panel’s moderator.

Dr Reza Gholami (Middlesex University, London) was the first speaker. Gholami is a Senior Lecturer in the Sociology of Education whose work focuses on diasporic secularism, Shi’a religiosity, and citizenship and education. Drawing on his past and present research, Gholami presented on “Non-Islamiosity within London’s Iranian Diaspora: Research Implications and Possibilities.” He coined the term ‘non-Islamiosity,’ and argued that it is both a mechanism and a methodological tool for our understanding of the identity negotiation process and agency of members of the Iranian diaspora in London. It is a mechanism through which Iranians in London develop their diasporic identities, producing new every-day discourses and forms of knowledge. It is a methodological tool for better understanding both religious and secular experiences, enabling a more nuanced examination of Islam and secularism in British society. Gholami concluded his talk by emphasizing the need to “remove hate from the equation,” and the importance of focusing secular-religious debates on problematizing ways of thinking, not condemning them.

The Reverend Dr James Walters was our panel’s second speaker. Walters serves as the Chaplain to The LSE and oversees the new LSE Faith Centre, providing the school’s students and staff with pastoral care and supporting religious life and cohesion within the LSE community. Drawing on the work he has done with The LSE Faith Centre, Walters gave a talk titled “Creating the LSE Faith Centre: Moving from Importing Conflict to Exporting Peace.” The new centre has been designed in order to create a space for dialogue about, between, and within religions on a non-denominational, religiously neutral university
The purpose of this panel was to explore possibilities and barriers to belonging in multicultural societies, with a focus on religious communities. The panel was moderated by Dr Eleni Andreouli (The Open University), a social psychologist with experience in researching processes of citizenship and identity in diverse settings.

The first speaker from the panel was Catriona Robertson, the convenor of the London Boroughs Faiths Network. Robertson has extensive experience working with religious and local community groups in India, the South Pacific and London. Drawing on this experience, Robertson delivered a talk with the title “Are you ‘hard to reach’? What does religious othering look like from a local community perspective?”.

Robertson argued that, often, marginalised communities are further stigmatised by the very practices which are designed to integrate them into mainstream society. Robertson discussed this in terms of ‘alienating engagement’, that is, efforts, such as consultations, outreach, and devised inclusion and prevention programmes, which aim to reach communities that are constructed as ‘hard to reach’. Robertson argued that such efforts have the effect of further alienating these communities by putting them in the spotlight and homogenising them. Robertson argued that religious groups are not simply an aggregate of individuals of the same faith but complex social networks. These networks are often alienated from public services, such as the police or the NHS, which see them as problems to solve or as passive recipients of public services. Robertson concluded her talk by reflecting on efforts on the part of religious groups to become active agents in civic society by holding elected representatives and policy makers to account, shifting the balance of power, co-designing public services, tackling long-standing inequalities and changing attitudes and practices within the local public sector.
The second speaker from this panel was Aidan Cottrell-Boyce. Cottrell-Boyce is working towards a doctoral thesis at the Divinity faculty of the University of Cambridge. His work focuses on the role of religious doctrines of salvation (soteriology) as a catalyst for resistance. The title of his talk was “Religious Belief and the Excluding Excluded: The role of belief in the development of Resistance Identity”. Drawing on the work of Manuel Castells, Cottrell-Boyce reflected on the role of religious beliefs and narratives of salvation in catalysing and fuelling resistance to hegemonic culture. He argued that ‘resistant identities’, such as those of Predestinarian Puritanism, Islamic Jihadists, Uyghur Islam and Rastafarianism, are fuelled by a ‘soteriology of resistance’ which is based on the value placed on ‘singularity’ and ‘outsiderliness’ in these religious traditions. Cottrell-Boyce concluded his talk by reflecting on the idea that efforts to moderate and integrate beliefs by the majoritarian outgroup may actually increase the separation of these groups from the mainstream.

The final talk of this panel was given by Dr Leda Blackwood from the University of St Andrews. Blackwood is a social psychologist with a particular interest in understanding processes of social change taking under consideration the dynamics of intergroup relations. The title of Blackwood’s talk was “Flying while Muslim: Citizenship and misrecognition in the airport”. The talk shed new light on debates around participation with a focus on everyday experiences. In her talk, Blackwood presented findings from her research with Scottish Muslims concerning their experiences of surveillance at airports. Adopting a social-psychological perspective, Blackwood emphasised the role of recognition and misrecognition in everyday interactions for processes of participation and citizenship. Blackwood presented data from her research on Scottish Muslims’ encounters with airport authorities which show that Scottish Muslims are often misrecognised and othered as potential suspects in such encounters. Blackwood concluded that misrecognition in such micro-interactions can have a significant effect in restricting Scottish Muslims’ ability to act as citizens and participate in the public sphere in terms that are their own.

The three talks were followed by a plenary discussion with questions from the audience. The discussion focused on the negative effects of stigma towards Muslim communities, in terms of both ‘lay’ social relations and public policy, for participation and equality. The role of empowerment and agency of community groups for addressing these issues in multicultural societies was also considered in the discussion.
Following on from the first two panel discussions, the aim of this final panel was to reflect on possible solutions for breaking the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide by engaging with young people and their education, both formal and informal. This session brought together Rosalind Birtwistle – co-founder of the Interfaith Marriage Network – and Dr Mike Diboll – Research Associate at UCL Institute of Education. Dr Jawiria Naseem (UCL Institute of Education), whose research focuses on issues of ‘integration’ and racism as experienced by young British and French Muslim graduates, chaired this panel.

Rosalind Birtwistle opened the session by sharing her experiences of supporting interfaith families as part of her work with the Interfaith Marriage Network, in their everyday struggles for acceptance within their respective families and neighbourhoods. Birtwistle first focused on the particular position of children of interfaith couples and the challenges they face regarding their religious identity. Identities are not clear-cut and fixed categories but can be multiple and flexible. Yet interfaith families are under pressure from the outside world, Birtwistle argued, to conform to pre-determined fixed categories. She challenged the constant pressure on children to categorise themselves, first as students, for example while filling out information cards at school, then as adults, submitting their census forms. Drawing on her research with families, Birtwistle then highlighted the difficult position of parents regarding their children’s education at school and their (religious) education at home. Birtwistle thus presented the hidden complexity behind, what seemed to be a simple, ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy. This dichotomy opposes not only the home and the outside world but raises dilemmas within the family home itself. So how do you raise children who could fully contribute to the world as a member of an interfaith family when that very world is challenging their religious existence?

Birtwistle suggested that the answer to this question lies within the ways parents interact. Negotiating differences as partners (father-mother; parents’ families) through communication and mutual respect are positive models of social engagement from which the children could learn. Indeed, children of interfaith couples deal with ‘us’ and ‘them’ in a very unique way since ‘us’ and ‘them’ are part of one family. Finding a relationship balance within which each partner is comfortable and her/his identities are not threatened offers a secure environment for the children to express their own (religious) identities freely and engage with others with confidence. This safe environment would help the children to become, what Birtwistle termed, ‘spiritually bilingual’. ‘Spiritual bilingualism’ refers to personal characteristics such as religious tolerance, empathy and sense of justice. In conclusion, Birtwistle argued that if parents in interfaith relationships help children to connect across religious borders, they would be equipped to deal with religious differences without demonising and stereotyping the ‘other.’ This could enable them to be key drivers for social change, as they are in a unique position to break the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divisions within wider society.

Complementing Birtwistle’s talk, Dr Mike Diboll also discussed the importance of providing young people tools to engage with others, but focused on the more formal aspect of education. Diboll framed his talk within the issue of extremism in Britain and its negative implication for the educational agenda. To illustrate this point, among other examples, Diboll discussed a questionnaire sent by the London Council to Year 6 pupils in schools with high intake of Muslim students. The questionnaire was the result of the left-wing action plan implemented since May 2015 to identify young people with radical thinking. Diboll then shared an extract of the questionnaire and demonstrated how the language used reflected popular myths about Muslims in Britain. Criticising the government’s current socio-political agenda of anti-radicalisation, Diboll suggested that such initiatives only contribute to reinforcing the ‘us’ and ‘them’ divide.

This example led Diboll to discuss the concepts of multiple ontologies and postcolonial nationalism (developed by Annemarie Mol and Benedict Anderson respectively) to provide
insights into why young people would support the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The crux of his argument was the existence of neoliberal approach to education which imposes an authoritarian definition of Britishness and thus fails to place the development of criticality among young people at the heart of the education agenda. Diboll suggested that the current UK educational system emphasises instrumental gain and material career progress (i.e. to suit the economy) and advocates the myth of meritocracy. This framework, Diboll continued, does not allow young people to express themselves, to perceive education as a socially interactive process, or to nurture their agency and to appreciate commitment to democratic values, civil society and social justice. Thus a support of ISIS (which gains greater legitimacy in young people’s imagination with its claim to statehood) is a culture of resistance to the dominant UK ideologies. Diboll concluded by suggesting that entrenching fundamental British values in schools is a flawed approach to tackling radicalisation. What is needed is an educational space for young people to acquire a language to express themselves and learn critical skills required to challenge extremist narratives.

Naseem summarised the key connecting point in both presentations as the need to develop young people’s critical thinking so that they can be socially engaged with others and thus become active members of society. The public debate that followed remained focused on that point. Delegates were interested in exchanging ideas about the ways young people could reclaim their thinking by openly discussing topics of radicalisation, ISIS, and religion in general. Delegates agreed that this would offer a space for dialogue where young people could express their anxieties and articulate their religious ideas safely (as is possible in interfaith families) and thus feel comfortable with their identities and sense of belonging.
This session invited panel members, keynote speakers and audience members to share their reflections of the day’s talks and discussions, and allowed for suggestions of how to move forward and provide concrete steps that could be implemented by attendees in their respective fields beyond the conference day itself. It was moderated by Amena Amer, a PhD student in Social Psychology (London School of Economics), whose research focuses on the racialisation of Islam and its impact on construction, negotiation and performance of identity among white British Muslims.

Amer began by sharing points raised by Suniya Qureshi (CEO of Qismat Foundation) and Reverend Dr James Walters (LSE Chaplain), both of whom were unable to be present for the session. For Qureshi the blurring of the lines between faith, religion, culture and politics can be hugely problematic. In using the example of the politicisation of religion in that religion is sometimes used as a “call to arms”, Qureshi noted that this blurring can be detrimental to moving beyond the categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’ as it can often lead to a lack of understanding of what issues are being dealt with at any given moment or context. Nevertheless, Qureshi emphasised that she does recognise that differences in opinion and interpretation need to be respected and there needs to be an awareness of the complexity of issues when embarking on conversations and discussions between groups. Walters’ points followed on these lines in that he stressed at the start of any dialogue assurance needs to be given that talking to other people and other groups will in no way compromise an individual’s or group’s beliefs. He added that the presence of young people in these discussions is key, not only as contributors but also as leaders, working towards bridging differences in our society.

A reoccurring theme that was raised by a number of panel members during this session was education and it’s role moving beyond the categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Dr Reza Gholami (Middlesex University) talked of the need to include diasporic communities and issues of migration in conversations about inclusivity and community. He discussed the link between education and diasporic communities and how they can provide models for a more cohesive and integrated society. Gholami noted that to assume anyone is far removed from the patterns of migration and diaspora would be naïve, in that human movement and travel, be it across nations or within nations, is the norm rather than the anomaly. He noted that one of the most important points of the day was the appreciation of the human element and that understanding an ‘us’ in the global sense is easier than understanding an ‘us’ in a national sense. While acknowledging that nationalism as an identity marker will not disappear, he suggested that it simply needs to be reimagined and by drawing on Paul Gilroy’s notion of humanism (a call for a universal identity beyond markers of difference) suggests that the tools are available, theoretically, politically and discursively, for this to occur.

Dr Mike Diboll (Institute of Ismaili Studies) echoed these sentiments and emphasised on the important contributions diasporic communities can bring to these discussions. He used an example of his new role as Leader of the Secondary Teachers Education Programme in the Institute of Ismaili Studies and the way in which, compared to the teaching of issues such as British values that are prevalent in mainstream discourse, the educational initiatives put forward by diasporic communities are much more multidimensional and stressed that much can be learned from listening to the voices of diasporic communities.

Aidan Cottrell-Boyce (PhD student, Faculty of Divinity, Cambridge) pointed out that a key concern for many was the way in which normative sets of values, for example, British values, were being promoted. While he acknowledged that education is important, Cottrell-Boyce added that before venturing further in discussions about moving beyond categories such as ‘us’ and ‘them’ there needs to be a more nuanced understanding of what education is. For example, if the promotion and education of values means scripted indoctrination by teacher it would have very different consequences compared to if students are equipped with the critical faculties that enable them to come to conclusions themselves.
Furthermore, Cottrell-Boyce noted that by nurturing environments where young people are able to come to these conclusions about values themselves, there is no doubt that their likelihood of enacting them would increase since imposing and dictating ideas and values is extremely potent to communication, dialogue and democracy.

Other points highlighted by the speakers included more practical steps to take beyond the conference. Diboll noted that there is a need to turn conference topics such as the present one into initiatives, follow up conferences and papers, and to have a social media presence which allows the conversations between the participants of the conference, and others, to continue.

While agreeing with many of the points shared by other panel members, Dr Leda Blackwood (St Andrews) highlighted that a point missing from the day’s discussions was the issue of power. She stressed the importance of recognising its role in who has the power to create and be an active, more prominent part of the discussion about creating a more inclusive society. Reflecting on the day’s discussions, Blackwood recognised that there are multiple models of social change. She acknowledged the breadth of social psychology research which has contributed on the topic with regard to collective action, bringing groups together and overcoming conflict. Yet, she stressed that some research can silence legitimate points of tension and difference between groups, and that within discussions about ‘us’ and ‘them’ it is imperative to acknowledge and deconstruct the influence of power. Blackwood also stated that it is key to include all members of society, in particular those in low power positions, within these discussions as it is essential for their voices to be heard.

The last member of the panel to speak was Rosalind A. Birtwistle (Interfaith Marriage Network) who commented on the way in which schools instrumentalise certain values and that this needs to be challenged. She also talked of the importance of recognising the human element in what can often be an abstract discussion, echoing a point made by Gholami. A question from the audience brought the conversation back to Blackwood’s point about power. The audience member asked the panel to share their opinions on minority group and majority group dynamics and who should invite whom for dialogue. This question was framed with particular reference to Britain’s white majorities and the responsibility they have to be open and recognise that they have more power than others. Blackwood responded to this by stating that often minority groups and majority groups have very different conceptions of what they want to achieve. She highlighted that majority group members’ power allows them to gloss over many of the problems being faced by minority groups and while acknowledging them, look towards a future beyond the differences and divisions rather than deconstructing and discussing the problematic issues and experiences first – something many minority groups members would prefer. Blackwood emphasised the need and responsibility of the majority groups to listen, to turn the analytic gaze inwards and to respect people in minority groups who are pursuing strategies of their own towards a more inclusive society. She made reference to methods of solidarity by majority groups, such as the #IWillRideWithYou twitter campaign in Australia, and discussed how powerful these types of solidarity initiatives can be when majority groups take responsibility and recognise their privilege.

Gholami added that there is a need to be wary of equating power with majority drawing on Bahrain and its ruling Sunni Muslim minority as an example. He went on to discuss the relationship between resistance and power and the importance to harness pockets of resistance and democratic energy, redeploy them collectively to take steps closer to our aims of a society beyond ‘us’ and ‘them’.

The session concluded with a point by Diboll, who highlighted that there is space for commonality to be found among young people in relation to the grievances and idealisms they hold towards the society in which they live. He stated that discussions about ‘us’ and ‘them’ are not about ethnic or religious differences, but rather about those with power and those without. Therefore, he suggested, the commonalities in these grievances can be channelled towards those who have the power to determine how prevalent discourses are structured.
The conference closed with a lecture by Martyn Barrett, Emeritus Professor of Psychology at the University of Surrey. His talk, titled ‘Competences for Democratic Culture and Intercultural Dialogue: An Education Initiative Aimed at Building More Inclusive Societies Across Europe,’ connected with many of the topics covered throughout the day, but also moved our analytical gaze outward towards the wider context of the European Union. Barrett began by contextualising the multiculturalism debate – over the past 20 years global migration has fundamentally altered the world that we live in, making cultural diversity a fact of life across most of the world. Unfortunately, high levels of intolerance, prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination towards minority ethnic and religious groups often accompany cultural diversity. While the day’s discussions focused on issues faced by Muslims in Britain, Barrett emphasised that the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narrative is not exclusive to Muslims, but is a problem faced by many minority groups across Europe. This problem, he argued, is linked to perceived threat, as cultural diversity has resulted in increased anxieties amongst majority populations that view immigration as a threat to national identities. This can exacerbate xenophobic forms of nationalism, which in turn can result in minority groups separating themselves from the majority and minimal communication between minority and majority populations.

EU countries have implemented different forms of multiculturalism policies in an attempt to build more inclusive and cohesive societies. Many of these policies have failed, causing notable politicians to abandon multiculturalism. Barrett argued, however, that there is a new policy approach that few have yet to apply – interculturalism. The Council of Europe (CoE), established in 1949 in the wake of WWII, was created with the intention of promoting and protecting human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. In 2008 the CoE published a white paper on intercultural dialogue, finding that in culturally diverse societies tolerance is vital and that intercultural dialogue is necessary in order to achieve social cohesion. The report claims that intercultural dialogue enables people to achieve deeper understanding of diverse worldviews and practices, encourages cooperation, reduces prejudice, and promotes tolerance. As a psychologist, Barrett pointed out that there is a substantial amount of psychological evidence to support this claim. There are over 500 studies that support Allport’s (1954) Contact Hypothesis, which states that prejudice and hostility between different groups can be reduced by bringing these groups into contact with each other. But, this works best under four conditions: people from the different groups see themselves as of roughly equal status, prolonged contact allowing personal relationships to develop, cooperation on joint activities with common goals, and being backed by an explicit framework of support by those in authority or social institutions.

It is on this last point that Barrett focused – policy makers should pay close attention to how social institutions can provide a framework of support for intercultural dialogue. Education is at the heart of building more inclusive societies, as it lays the groundwork for future citizens. Barrett’s current project, ‘Competencies for Democratic Culture and Intercultural Dialogue,’ attempts to address this. It focuses on how teachers across Europe can equip young people with the competencies that they need to function as effective democratic citizens in culturally and religiously diverse societies, and for engaging in respectful intercultural dialogue more generally with their fellow citizens. They are doing this by examining the psychological resources that are needed to deploy intercultural and democratic competencies. They have identified 20 core competencies that fall into four areas: values (i.e., human rights, diversity, rule of law), attitudes (i.e., openness, respect, tolerance of difference, civic mindedness, responsibility, self efficacy, and tolerance of ambiguity), skills (i.e., empathy, flexibility, cooperation, adaptability, among others), and knowledge and critical thinking (i.e., of self, of language, and of citizenship).

Over the next few years The Council of Europe aims to develop a national educational systems
framework that empowers young people with the ability to function as autonomous social agents who are capable of choosing and pursuing their own goals within the scaffolding of democracy and interculturalism. This is envisioned not just as openness to exploration and ability to learn on one’s own, but also developing critical thinkers who can evaluate the information that they are acquiring and possibilities for the future. Barrett stated that it is vital to realise, however, that this is not a fix-all solution. We need institutional structures in order for citizens to exercise their democratic and intercultural competencies. We need to take action to deal with systematic patterns of disadvantage, how resources are allocated, and the ways that disadvantaged groups are excluded from positions of power and privilege within our societies. All of these aspects serve to disempower people from engaging in democratic behaviour and intercultural dialogue, irrespective of their levels of competence.

For more information on Barrett’s project, along with his other work, please visit his website at www.martynbarrett.com

How do we move forward from a separate ‘us’ and ‘them’ to a common ‘we’? This was the question this conference sought to answer. The issue of ‘moving beyond’ was considered from a conceptual point of view as well as from a more practical one.

It will not be an overstatement to say that all presentations focused on forms of collaboration across groups. Throughout the panel sessions, all speakers and delegates discussed potential ways for bringing together groups of people, who are distinct nationally, ethnically and/or religiously, in order to dispel misunderstandings, (re)build trust, and open routes for dialogue. Different spheres of interactions or spaces, as Reverend Dr. James Walters noted, were subjects of discussion including informal environments and organised settings.

Although working towards a common ‘we’ can be done at many levels, as the various discussions suggested, we would like to highlight two main interrelated points which, in hindsight, emerged as the connective thread of the day: a focus on sameness and the importance of developing critical thinking.
Let’s celebrate our similarities was the concluding remark made by our guest speaker Suniya Qureshi as she opened the day’s proceedings. Multiculturalism is not simply about respecting differences and diversity; it is first and foremost about living together as one group of people. As idyllic as this might seem, this notion was indeed perceived by many delegates as a starting point in bridging gaps across groups. The difficulties associated with creating, or as some suggested, reviving, a sense of commonality was examined through the notion of ‘Britishness’.

What does it mean to be British? What is Britishness to a foreign-born person, a second or third generation or even to the majority groups? In essence, we are defined by our beliefs and practices. Or, to put it differently, our being is translated into our actions and thinking. The existence of diversity should, in theory, allow the existence of multiple definitions of Britishness too. Yet, as Dr. Mike Diboll stated, tensions and unhealthy interactions exist precisely because of an ‘ethnicisation of Britishness’. Blurring the line between the white majority ethnicity and nationality with no space for other minority ethnicities has undoubtedly led to divisions and to the constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them’. Social justice and fairness, for example, need not be presented as characteristics of Britishness, but simply as common human values that are shared by all. In doing so, Britishness is defined as a flexible notion, in a continuous process of development, to which various ethnic and religious groups could identify.

This, however, does not imply that oppositions are to be ignored. On the contrary, taking into consideration differences in thinking and practice into consideration is important, especially if they are used to engage in struggles over equality and recognition. Nevertheless, these negotiations can be more effective if they are framed on grounds of commonness and a shared sense of belonging.

Focusing on similarities in values and practices thus offers stronger opportunities for constructing common identities rather than attempting to provide a fixed and uniform understanding of Britishness. Celebrating similarities is therefore about upholding shared values and practices. It is about taking differences – ethnic, religious and national – and, as Dr Reza Gholami rightly pointed out, ‘hate out of the equation’.

MOVING BEYOND THROUGH ‘A CELEBRATION OF SIMILARITIES’
Related to the above theme was the importance of developing and nurturing critical thinking, especially among young people. Indeed, how does one move beyond apprehension, stereotypes and other misconceptions if one cannot challenge them in the first place? Having the necessary tools and space for engaging in critical thinking is an essential part of constructing a sense of commonness.

Education acquired in shared formal spaces such as in schools, or ‘beyond schooling’ (as Aidan Cottrell-Boyce put it), such as in religious environments, is a central component of any form of interaction. Thus, what is learnt and taught about each other (i.e. the majority and the minority ethnic groups) is paramount. Yet, education in formal and religious settings promotes a singular knowledge in a way that undermines the development of critical skills, as it provides only one form of language for expressing one’s views. Offering, or as some speakers suggested imposing, a singular perspective is counterproductive. It is not sufficient to simply incorporate or embrace other forms of knowledge. Education must focus and engage with different knowledge systems equally.

In that respect, education of younger generations was at the heart of the discussion. Indeed, this group needs to be given opportunities to engage with multiple perspectives, while assessing the information they receive (whether formal or informal). Suppressing challenging discourses or views is not the answer and similarly, categorising alternative views in moral terms defeats the purpose of thinking freely and safely. On the contrary, giving young people a space to express themselves and to have their views heard (as different as they might be) is an important step towards creating an inclusive environment, as they are the ones who will shape tomorrow’s society.

Opening up dialogue about contentious topics and views not fitting in the secular and/or the dominant discourse therefore offers scope for developing critical thinking, and, as Professor Martyn Barrett argued, democratic competencies.
**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The Islamic Centre of England  
- for their financial support

The Centre was founded in December 1995, and opened officially in November 1998. The Centre, in common with other Islamic organisations in Europe, wishes to provide spiritual guidance for the Muslim community at large, and also wishes to cater for the social, cultural, educational and recreational needs of members of the community – especially women and the next generation. The Centre’s other main objective manifests itself in its sincere effort to disseminate authentic knowledge about Islam and to provide non-Muslims with a better and clearer understanding of Islam. ICEL seeks to build bridges with the society at large and establish closer ties between peoples of different faiths and cultures all over the world.

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Rosalind Parker  
- for her assistance in processing the call for papers

All of the staff at Cumberland Lodge  
- for their work towards hosting the event

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