



## The venomous ideology of religious intolerance

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*Secular liberals need to denounce the persecution of the religious by the religious, says Farhad Ahmad, a British Imam*

I came to Britain as a child when my Ahmadi Muslim parents fled persecution in Pakistan. The hatred of Ahmadis is so ingrained in Pakistani society that I recall once seeing a sign, proudly planted into a popular roundabout, which advised readers to avoid three things: Satan, Shezan (a fruit-juice brand made by an Ahmadi-owned firm) and Ahmadis.

Many Muslims consider Ahmadi Muslims to be heretics because we believe that our founder, Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, was a prophet who came in the 19th century in servitude to the Prophet Muhammad. He did not bring any new teaching or change Islam in any way, but a majority of Muslims consider his claim to prophethood to be blasphemous.

Spurred on by religious fanatics, Pakistan enshrined the persecution of Ahmadi Muslims into its constitution in 1974. The parliament declared that the beliefs of Ahmadi Muslims are illegal and so we are not true Muslims. When millions of Pakistani citizens voted on the 25th of July, Ahmadi Muslims were notable by their absence: if they wished to cast their vote they would have had to declare themselves non-Muslims.

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Nor is Pakistan the only country where Ahmadi Muslims face persecution; such prejudice is vehement elsewhere, notably in Indonesia and Algeria. Sadly, it has begun to rear its ugly head in the West, too.

In Britain my family enjoys fundamental rights that we never had in Pakistan, especially religious freedom, which has allowed me to live comfortably as a Muslim and to train as an imam. I have come to believe that the principles of pluralism and liberal democracy support the right of any citizen to have faith and participate in politics.



Still, British liberals must pay more attention to the growing problem of anti-Ahmadi prejudice in their own backyards. Some may feel it is not their problem—that as non-Muslims they have no business intervening in intra-Muslim conflicts.

But when secular liberals ignore the rise of intolerance fomented by one religious group against another, they risk damaging the values they claim to hold. If one vulnerable minority group is targeted today, and society remains silent, tomorrow it will be another, then another, and another.

In Pakistan, Ahmadi Muslims can be jailed for “posing as Muslims”. In madrassas and at religious gatherings, the faithful are urged to murder Ahmadi Muslims, desecrate their mosques, prevent their burials and annul their marriages. Just this May in Sialkot, a city in north-eastern Pakistan, century-old minarets on an Ahmadi mosque were destroyed.

To my dismay, we did not entirely escape this venomous ideology when we emigrated to Britain. Divisions among Muslims have become transnational; it is sadly not uncommon for British Ahmadis to encounter social and institutional persecution.

For example, the cleric who incited the attack on the Ahmadiyya mosque of Sialkot last May spoke against Ahmadi Muslims in Derby in 2014. Flyers advocating the murder of Ahmadi Muslims were found in London in 2016. Anti-Ahmadi preachers have delivered a stream of hateful lectures in British mosques, and on television channels, radio stations and online.

To counter such sectarianism, grassroot initiatives are being organised. For example, this weekend, I will join more than 30,000 people at Britain’s largest Muslim convention to promote mutual understanding and pluralism among Muslims and with people of other faiths.

Despite the convention’s noble objectives, mainstream institutions such as the Muslim Council of Britain would deny that it is a gathering of Muslims. In the past, the MCB has declared Ahmadis non-Muslim and refused to call our places of worship mosques.

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It may come as a surprise to you to learn that pluralism is actually at the heart of the Islamic tradition. Thus, Muslims do not have to search beyond their own faith to find inspiration for tolerance. For example, the Koran commands Muslims to find ways of collaborating with people of other faiths, urging Muslims to [call](#) the “People of the Book” towards “a word equal between us and you”. In other words, it asks Muslims to focus on shared values with people of other faiths.

Muslims often call for inter-religious tolerance based on this verse. But Muslims should apply that same message of tolerance closer to home. After all, the countless shared values that can unite Muslims of all denominations are far greater than the similarities that exist between Muslims and “People of the Book”. Time and again the Koran urges Muslims to overcome sectarian differences, even declaring, “Surely all believers are brothers. So make peace between brothers.”



I trust that my and other minority communities who fled from persecution to Britain continue to find safety in this open, pluralist society. But for Britons and liberals everywhere to deepen their commitment to liberalism and pluralism, they must recognise persecution within all groups, including religions; and know that if they fail to provide a meaningful voice to religious, geographical, gender and ethnic diversity, they will fail to live up to their most cherished values.

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