

## Religious Festivals and Celebrations

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Over the past few years there has been concern about the secularisation or de-Christianisation of certain religious festivals. In particular, concerns that local authorities decided to rename Christmas. In fact, this was not the case, although stories persist of Christmas 'being banned'. Some have suggested that Christmas, celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ and wishing people 'Merry Christmas' offends members of other religious traditions.

As Muslims and Christians together we are wholeheartedly committed to the recognition of Christian festivals. Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus and we wish this significant part of the Christian heritage of this country to remain an acknowledged part of national life. We believe that the only beneficiaries of a declining Christian presence in public life are those committed to a totally non-religious standpoint. We value the presence of clear institutional markers within society of the reality and mystery of God in public life, rather than its absence.

We believe that our open and democratic society should promote freedom and expression of religion in the public space rather than restrict it. We welcome, for instance, public recognition of Eid al Fitr, as Muslims celebrate the conclusion of Ramadan. We value partnerships in some local communities which enables others to share with Muslims at this time of celebration. This affirms the public contribution people of different faiths bring to our society. We believe that downplaying the celebration of religious festivals promotes frustration, alienation and even anger within religious communities. Such negative approaches devalue religion and undermine the positive contributions that faith communities bring to society.

We also rejoice in the contribution and value of all religious communities in our country – Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and others. It is important for the integrity of all religious traditions that we recognise the centrality of their major festivals. In our diverse society we need to foster a mature and healthy outlook which recognizes this country's Christian heritage as well as the important part that other religious traditions play within our culture. This demands increased religious understanding by government and local authorities, and we are encouraged by the involvement of the Department for Communities in this area and the recent Inter Faith Week.

We are thankful for policies and actions which respond helpfully to our changing religious environment. On the other hand, we are concerned that approaches based on anti-religious philosophies, or fear of religion, risk causing alienation in many communities and fanning the growth of extremism. Those whose react to religious pluralism by downplaying the place of Christianity in British society unthinkingly become recruiting agents for the extreme right. They provoke antagonism towards Muslims and others by foisting on them an anti-Christian agenda which they do not hold.

People need occasions for festival and celebration. For many in our society, these opportunities are fundamentally religious and spiritual. We encourage everyone with responsibility in national and local government to give an open and welcoming space for religious festivals as part of a positive contribution to community cohesion.

We also publish again, on the next page, Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra's article on Christmas.

*Originally released by Bishop David Gillett, First Chair of the Christian Muslim Forum and Dr Ataullah Siddiqui, First Vice Chair. Updated by Julian Bond, Director, Christian Muslim Forum*

## **Muslims are not offended by celebrations of other religions (2006)**

*By Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, Chairman, Inter Faith Relations Committee, MCB;  
President, Christian Muslim Forum*

Muslims regard Judaism and Christianity as divine religions. Islam is a continuation and an extension of those great religions. In order to qualify as a Muslim, one has to believe in Moses (Musa) and Jesus (Isa) along with all the Biblical prophets, peace be upon them. Muslims have to believe in the Torah (Tawrat), the Psalms (Zabur) and the Gospel (Injil) although Muslim scholars do have some issues about the accuracy of a few parts of these scriptures. And although Islam declares that it is the way of life chosen by God for humanity and that Muhammad, peace be upon him, is the final messenger of God, and that the Qur'an is the final message, the Qur'an affectionately refers to the followers of these previous scriptures as the People of the Book.

Muslims see these religious communities as cousins not only in faith but in ancestry also, through Abraham, that great pillar of monotheism. Islam encourages invitation (da`wah) to Islam through wisdom and good speech and through constructive and dignified dialogue. Muslims are not allowed to use force or coercion in order to convert others. Islam calls on Muslims to respect all human beings and all religions as they are. Muslims are not allowed to force Islam and its practices upon others in society. They are encouraged to set a good example, show alternatives to lifestyles and to be good role models and to refrain from and to declare their condemnation of all evil in society without inciting hatred for the perpetrators.

So we Muslims are baffled when we read and hear that Christmas is being "banned" and replaced with something else because the organisers do not want to offend Muslims. Where do they get this idea from? Who told them that? Such actions lead to comments like, "It's those Muslims again. They always have a problem with everything we do. Why don't they just leave and go back to their own country?"

A majority of British Muslims were born here. Where do we want them to go? Local authorities, organisations and businesses trying to avoid offending Muslims and trying to be politically correct actually cause more harm to cohesion and understanding. There is a need to stem the tide of such ill-thought-out decisions where ruling bodies try to 'second guess' the attitudes of the communities and seek to defuse conflicts before they have even been felt or arisen.

To suggest that calling Christmas with its proper name and that Christmas decorations would offend Muslims is absurd. Why should Christmas not be celebrated openly and wholeheartedly in our country when a vast majority of people identify themselves as Christians. This country owes a lot to Christianity. Its moral values and ethical codes have been moulded by Christian teachings for centuries. In fact the whole planet has benefited from Christian teachings and continues to do so. Muslims would adopt all those values and moral codes without question or hesitation. Even if the Christian communities in our country were a minority, we would want Christmas to be celebrated because ours is a multi faith, multi cultural, pluralist and democratic country.

We have been calling on Christian friends for a long time now to reclaim Christmas from the commercialisation of it. We have been encouraging them to bring back the religious and spiritual richness of Christmas. Last year, a delegation of Christians and Muslims were in Brussels for a conference. For dinner we went to a restaurant in the centre of the city. I was thrilled to see that the nativity scene was re-enacted with life size figurines of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus, the wise men, stables, straw and even live sheep! Why have I not seen this in Britain? It would be wonderful to show my children what the very special Jesus means to Christians and to discuss with them what he means to us and to learn the different beliefs we all hold.

Merry Christmas to all Christians and whoever else chooses to celebrate it.