



## Open Letter to The Most Revd and Rt Hon Justin Welby Archbishop of Canterbury

Dear Archbishop,

We hope and pray that you are well and in good health.

We are writing to express our surprise and disappointment at hearing recent reports in the media about remarks made by yourself regarding Sharia law in your book "Reimagining Britain". Whereas you recognise that Islamic law is "something of immense sophistication", we fear that your comments in general will be used to add to the ever increasing Islamophobic headlines and rhetoric surrounding the Muslim community by claiming that Islamic rules are incompatible with British laws and that the Sharia law should never become part of the British legal system. In your words, this would be due to British law having "underlying values and assumptions" that come from a clearly Christian tradition whereas the Sharia is considered to have an "ancient cultural narrative of its own" which cannot allegedly become part of another narrative.

We believe that these words appear to support a *Clash of Civilisations* narrative. Moreover, claiming that Sharia law is incompatible with Britain appears to be somewhat at odds with the current acceptance and integration of Halakah, Jewish law, which in many respects is similar to Sharia law. We find this singling out of the Muslim community therefore divisive. Where these arguments are put forward in support of protecting rights of women, for example, it is ironic and concerning that groups such as women and the elderly are actually facing the brunt of soaring Islamophobic crimes in the UK.

At the same time as your remarks concerning Sharia law were reported in some segments of the media, we were saddened to hear that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, one of the most revered places in all of Christendom was closed with effect from Sunday, 25 February 2018 in protest over tax payments to the Israeli authorities. In a rare step, church leaders accused Israel of a "systematic and unprecedented attack against Christians in the Holy Land" with respect to Israeli plans to tax their properties. We feel it is appropriate to remind ourselves of the tolerance of Islamic law in the history of the Holy Lands.

Islam came to the lands of Palestine in 637 when the Muslims under the leadership of the second Rightly Guided Caliph, 'Umar b. al- Khaṭṭab entered Jerusalem. It is said that the Patriarch of Palestine received him warmly and asked 'Umar to grant security to the people and their churches. 'Umar visited both the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and refused to pray in both fearing that he would set precedents for his people.

The much renowned Arab and Muslim historiographer and historian, Ibn Khaldun reported of 'Umar's visit to the Church in Jerusalem saying:

*“Umar b. Al-Khaṭṭab entered the sacred house and came to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. He sat inside among its companions until the time of prayer arrived. 'Umar said to the patriarch, “I want to pray.” The patriarch said, “Here is your place of prayer,” but 'Umar refrained from doing so and instead he prayed upon the staircase near a door apart from the church. When 'Umar finished his prayer, he said to patriarch, “If I prayed inside the church, the Muslims after me would take it and they would say: 'Umar prayed here.”*

'Umar went and prayed in a location just opposite to where the Church stands today, and it is there that today we find the Mosque of 'Umar in Jerusalem and the Mosque of 'Umar in Bethlehem which is one side of the famous Manger Square (the city's only Mosque). Whilst millions visit these two famous churches year on year, how many reflect on the fact that had it not been for the justice, mercy and tolerance of Islam and the Sharia as practiced by 'Umar, there would be no Churches for them to visit but rather, they would have become Mosques.

Jerusalem remains an evidence and symbol of the tolerance of Islam. This tolerance is further captured in the Treaty of 'Umar to the Christians of Palestine when he stated:

*“In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is the assurance of safety which the servant of Allah, 'Umar, the Commander of the Faithful, has given to the people of Palestine. He has given them an assurance of safety for themselves for their property, their churches, their crosses, the sick and healthy of the city and for all the rituals which belong to their religion. Their churches will not be inhabited by Muslims and will not be destroyed. Neither they, nor the land on which they stand, nor their cross, nor their property will be damaged. They will not be forcibly converted...”*

The Lewisham Islamic Centre has always enjoyed an excellent relationship with our local faith groups as well as those with no faith. This has been based on respectful and open discourse and understanding. We hope that in your position of influence and responsibility, you are able to discourage and counter the false assertions regarding faith based laws and observances made due to a simplistic understanding of a far more sophisticated and complex issue. The Lewisham Islamic Centre would be more than happy to host you at our Mosque should you wish to meet and discuss matters further – it would indeed be an honour.

Yours sincerely

**Lewisham Islamic Centre**

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