



Imam Shakeel responds to Dispatches: "I will continue to speak the truth to defend my community".

Many of you will have seen Dispatches on Ch4 a short while ago. The show was as many of us expected, yet more sensationalism concerning the minority Muslim community and another programme to add to the many others that have been made about Muslims - no other community is given as much airtime as we Muslims are.

Briefly, as to the question posed in the programme as to who speaks for British Muslims, this is a matter for the Muslims to decide - it is clear to most whose support the community has, as evidenced by the ongoing considerable funding and charitable donations received through the community itself rather than those marginal organisations funded externally.

Below is a letter I had sent to the makers of the Dispatches programme responding to the allegations they had raised with me prior to them airing the show. Please do have a read:

22 March 2018

Dear Mr Henshaw,

I am in receipt of your letter dated 16 March 2018 in which you make mention of your production company Hardcash Production's scheduled broadcast for Channel 4's Dispatches series shortly to air, targeting the Muslim Engagement and Development (MEND) and myself.

I note that your 'exposé' appears perfectly synchronised with the 19 March 2018 citation in The Times of negative reporting on MEND by the insidious, right-wing and anti-Muslim organisation The Henry Jackson Society whose militant animosity towards Muslims is well-documented with the goal of vindictively labelling mainstream Islamic organisations and speakers, including MEND, as extremists.

HIGH COURT RULING 2016

I understand that Hardcash Productions with Dispatches find it expedient to use the court judgement of my civil defamation case against the BBC in 2016 which, though ruled in the BBC's favour, must be stressed did not 'clear' the BBC and Andrew Neil of anything, neither did it 'convict' me of anything.

I reiterate that I do not accept that I am an 'extremist speaker', nor that I have 'espoused extremist views' in the past and I categorically refute any such assertion or suggestion. The charge of extremism is a false charge and I remain committed to disseminating the true teachings of Islam and the public condemnation and unreserved disavowal of terrorism of all kinds. Freely available online posts of my speeches, sermons, lectures, including joint open letters attest to this for anyone vaguely interested in objective reasoning.

My professional life as Imam, community leader and activist spans over 20 years and not one of these speeches, sermons or lectures are ever conducted in secret or to an audience vetted for 'extremism' receptivity as implied by the unpleasant and distasteful Jekyll and Hyde characterisation.

I categorically reject and I truly regret the gross unfairness of the allegations against me which disregard rationale, two decades of evidence to the contrary, and the judgement of countless Muslims and non-Muslims that I have worked so closely with for the last 20 years and continue to work with who know full well that the Judgment is a wholly incorrect representation of me.

I am no Jekyll, and I am no Hyde. I am a Muslim who has tirelessly championed interfaith dialogue, gang mediation, police and community engagement, and civic and political participation of Muslims through democratic means. The allegations against me are more akin to the witch hunting trials in Miller's 'The Crucible' than any character in Stevenson's 'Strange case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde'. And it goes without saying that any 'Jekyll and Hyde' personality open to public scrutiny can only ever engender chaos and anarchy, but the polar opposite is evident between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities in the London Borough of Lewisham where cohesion, trust and tolerance are second to none. The work I partake in at the Lewisham Islamic Centre is clear for all to see:

<http://www.lewishamislamiccentre.com/newsevents.php>

I have never ‘promoted and encouraged religious violence’ or incited anyone, Muslims or otherwise. I have only ever supported the basic human rights of innocent women, children and men to defend themselves within Islamic guidelines when they are mercilessly oppressed and attacked and this I will continue to do.

STAND UP TO RACISM EVENT 2017

It is clear that a racism and xenophobic offensive is sweeping Europe with migrants, refugees and Muslims made scapegoats to misdirect away from failed economic policies and catastrophic wars. I have always stood up against any form of oppression and was honoured to be invited to speak at this event in November 2017 alongside other outspoken anti-racism campaigners.

This was a public event with a predominantly non-Muslim attendance where recordings on mobile phones and other recording devices were clearly permitted. I gave no after-event talks or endorsements so to state that I was secretly recorded is a redundant and misleading point which immediately casts doubts on the credibility, objectivity and intent of your programme.

During this event, I spoke out against the Government’s toxic PREVENT programme, which has been heavily criticised by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, including:

Andy Burnham MP:

“PREVENT needs a wholesale rethink” Governments approach: “clumsy at best and highly divisive at worst”;

UN Special Rapporteur - Mr Maina Kiai:

Stated unclear Prevent guidelines gave decision makers "excessive discretion", which rendered the application of the policy "unpredictable and potentially arbitrary". This, he said, risked "dividing, stigmatising and alienating segments of the population" and that “PREVENT could end up promoting extremism”;

National Union of Teachers:

Rejected the Government’s anti-radicalisation scheme saying “it causes suspicion in the classroom and confusion in the staffroom”;

Open letter by 360 Professionals:

“We believe that PREVENT has failed not only as a strategy but also the very communities it seeks to protect. Instead of blindly attempting to strengthen this project, we call on the government to end its ineffective PREVENT policy and rather adopt an approach that is based on dialogue and openness.”

The quotation you find so objectionable was an analogy borrowed from Malcolm X’s Michigan State University Speech (23 January 1963), to those within the Muslim community who are co-opted to promote the PREVENT programme yet have failed to take any action against the systematic discrimination affecting the Muslim community. Malcom tells of the oppression of the powerless through the use of collaborators – he tells this through the relationship of a master and slave. The use of collaborators is a hallmark and consistent feature that can be found throughout history be that with the slave trade, colonialism or the oppression of Jews in Nazi Germany and Poland. There are so-called organisations pocketing PREVENT money with absolutely no accountability how it is spent, with no outcome measures, and whose probity is questionable, yet these same organisations are feted by some segments of the media and government and exemplified as ‘acceptable, good, moderate’ Muslims despite lacking any credibility or acceptability within the wider Muslim community who they supposedly represent.

My statement was clearly and specifically directed at these organisations and individuals who ‘say to the people that they are trying to serve the interest of the Muslims, when in reality they are serving their own pockets and their own interests’. To suggest that my sentiments are in some way at odds with MEND’s publicly stated values of tolerance and inclusivity is quite frankly ridiculous. Moreover, this was not an event organised by MEND.

As a British citizen, it is my absolute right, and duty as an Imam, to criticise oppressive counter terrorism strategy where I feel it is flawed, arbitrary and potentially harmful and discriminatory in its disproportionate impact on the Muslim community. Freedom of speech and freedom to criticise are celebrated as mainstays of a thriving democracy, and what I would assume are fundamental British Values. However, these freedoms become so quickly and so easily curtailed where Muslims are concerned as is clear from your sensational accusation of intolerance and exclusivity.

MEND

Mend is an organisation whose primary task is to work towards tackling Islamophobia across the UK through enfranchising British Muslims and encouraging them to 'integrate' with the media and politics. It is rather ironic that one example of extremism is failing to promote democracy and the rule of law, yet when Muslims work towards encouraging the Muslim community to be politically active and partake in the democratic process; it is invariably viewed through the prism of extremism.

I have always made the reason for my opposition to PREVENT very clear and have done so with openness and transparency. I want innocent Muslims to live as equals with the rest of society, with dignity and respect, and will continue to strive to achieve this. I will not be cowed by false characterisations, deliberate misrepresentations, or rest uneasy at the thought of a hidden camera upon the person of a 'Muslim' – I will continue to speak the truth in the defence of my community.

Yours sincerely

Shakeel Begg