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## Anjum Anwar interview: *'I'm a better Muslim now'*

Posted on April 1, 2010 – 12:00 am



### Kay Parris meets Anjum Anwar MBE

Anjum Anwar is sitting at the wheel of her car, cursing the mid-morning traffic. Our interview at a local hotel has overrun and we are late for a seminar she has arranged for some students at Blackburn College – to be led by the prominent liberal Muslim academic Dr Irfan Al-Alawi.

Her phone keeps bleeping with text messages, which she stops to check periodically – has she booked taxis for the young Bosnian visitors who are due at the cathedral? Will she be back in time for the next event? Where is she?

It was the same thing last night at a reception she and her fellow community dialogue worker, Canon Chancellor Chris Chivers, hosted at Blackburn Cathedral. Guests competed for her attention until she rushed off to give a radio interview – this was on the subject of a BBC TV documentary that showed young children being indoctrinated in Jihad and the use of guns in a video seized by local police.

As we inch forward in the line of cars, she says: "We have to challenge perceptions. What happens when a Jewish

boy is found with a gun – do I take it that 15 million Jews are terrorists?”

**Dr Al-Alawi’s seminar on terrorism and communities is about to begin in a small lecture classroom in Blackburn College. We rush to join the 30 or so gathered students, the majority of whom are Muslim, moments before Anwar is invited to the front to introduce the guest speaker.**

**A number of the girls are dressed in black burqas and niqabs (veils) – not something that deters Dr Al-Alawi from asserting as an aside during his discourse that veils have no basis in the Qur’an. He goes on to condemn the “idiocy” of Muslim protestors who wave burning flags at demonstrations, and opines that moderate Muslim protestors risk being associated with violent hysteria.**

**After the seminar, Anwar worries about possible complaints from parents, but she hopes the students will have found Al-Alawi’s ideas thought-provoking.**

**She is generally disinclined to shy away from difficult issues. As the BBC’s Question Time agonised over how to handle BNP leader Nick Griffin last October, Anwar was hosting an animated but orderly public meeting about far-right nationalism, bringing in a spectrum of local views. When the then US secretary of state Condoleeza Rice visited Blackburn in 2006, Anwar reportedly told her: “We don’t want blanket-bombing; we want dialogue.”**

**Her refusal to mince her words, and her passion for justice and unity helped earn her an MBE in 2005 for her services to community cohesion, when she was head of the Understanding Islam project co-founded by Lancashire County Council and the Lancashire Council of Mosques. She believes her headscarf allows her to say things that others might hesitate over for fear of being labelled politically incorrect.**

**Do you remember your first big event as dialogue development officer for Blackburn Cathedral?**

It was a public meeting on a very cold Tuesday evening in October 2005. I sat there thinking, nobody’s going to turn up, it’s going to be such a slap in the face – but 150 people came.

Chris Chivers (Canon Chancellor) and I each spoke for 15 minutes then we opened it up for questions. The first question that was put to me was: “Why do you keep driving your planes into our buildings?”

And I remember we had some police guards and vergers standing up to escort that young man, and I remember saying, “No, don’t do it.” He needs to ask, I have the right to respond. And I said: “I did not drive those planes, but I tell you what, I want to ask the same question: Why is it that these young people, who were highly educated we’ve been told, found it necessary to drive a plane into a building?”

“At the same time,” I said, “these terrorists were criminals – does it matter which faith they followed, does it matter what colour they were, what their agenda was? They were criminals. Do we have a criminal policy? Yes we do. Then let’s use it.”

The discussion moved on. We had a complete mix of people at that meeting – non-Muslims and Muslims, the headscarf, the veil, members of the congregation. We suddenly realised we had a market; people desperately wanted these discussions, and this cathedral could be the place where you move from monologue to dialogue.

**If I asked a passer-by, would they know you or anything about the work you are doing?**

I think some would if you were to go into central Blackburn. Thousands of people have come to our events. Yesterday I ordered a taxi and I started to spell my name, but the man on the phone said, “I know how to spell it, I know who you are.” He’d seen the interview I did for Inside Out on TV. Last night I did a radio interview. So there is a certain section of the community that is interested, or might pick things up.

There is also a community who thinks politics has nothing to do with religion. There are people, including some in the pews of the Cathedral, who don’t approve of what I do. Just as there are people in my own Muslim community who do not approve. But they are the minority and I’m a great believer in win the heart, win the mind. We work with them.

**Can you think of an example, of one thing that makes you think you are on the right track?**

Last night when we hosted an event I saw a man walk through the door of the cathedral who has not been helpful to us in the past. He is the head of a religious organisation, I won't say which one, and they have made things difficult for me. When I saw him walk through the door I said to Chris, we've cracked it. I'm not naïve enough to think I have changed his heart, but still, it tells me something has happened, that we might make a difference.

### **How about something that's not working so well?**

We created a women's advocacy organisation called Women's Voice a year ago, and it has had great success. But some of the issues we are dealing with are so hard. Women who come here to get married, from the sub-continent or elsewhere in the world, have no recourse to financial aid if the marriage breaks down, because their immigration status is in question. Those women are on the streets or they fall back on voluntary organisations. It has been so difficult to get the religious organisations to say this is a real problem, we have to deal with it. The Muslim leadership still has to find its feet when it deals with gender issues. It's something we haven't cracked yet, but I like to think we will do it.

### **How did you come to leave teaching and head up the Understanding Islam project?**

After 9/11 we knew there was a higher volume of racial and Islamophobic attacks in the community, even at the school level. The Lancashire Council of Mosques, in partnership with Lancashire County Council, said why don't we do something? Let's work with religious education in schools.

I remember walking into an interview at Lancashire Council of Mosques, which is heavily male-dominated. I saw these seven men sitting on a panel and I just walked out again. The director asked me where I was going. I said: "You are interviewing me because I am a headscarf, you don't really mean it." But I got the job.

### **Any particularly memorable moments from that time?**

One day soon after 9/11, I visited a small village school, where they had never seen an Asian, never seen a Muslim. You know, one of those beautiful places where the whole village is on one street, and I remember wearing a long black dress, and as I walked in, the children just froze.

I was with school kids from 9am until 3 o'clock. As I left the head teacher said to me: "I am so pleased you came. Until today, all the parents and children at this school believed Muslims are terrorists." That is the kind of work Understanding Islam was doing.

### **How do you cope with this kind of reaction to terrorism?**

When you terrorise a community it affects everyone, but the minority must not dictate to the majority. I cannot be implicated in what the minority does.

When we had the IRA problem, did we blanket bomb Ireland as we do in Iraq and Afghanistan? We didn't. We never had suicide bombers in Iraq pre-occupation. Why are we doing this?

What we need to do is to find the catalyst. What is the catalyst that makes someone say right I am going to blow up that building?

Could I be a potential terrorist tomorrow? I have asked myself that several times ñ what would it take for me? But my faith is the force that keeps my feet on the ground. There is a verse in the Qur'an that says: Do not allow the injustice of other people to move you away from justice.

### **So your most moderating influence is grounded in your faith?**

If I were to commit an atrocity, well that would mean I have not understood my faith.

I am very critical of elements in my own community – go back to your scriptures, learn about your faith, and you will be a better Muslim. Start to ask yourself those important questions.

I am a better Muslim for living in the United Kingdom. It's my home. I cannot speak, I cannot do anything that I am doing anywhere in the world as I can in the UK. Because my mind is free to think and to worship.

### **How central a role does faith play in your life?**

I'm someone who could be considered paranoid I think. Because every step I take, I need to know if it's the right step. Of course I make mistakes, I am a human being, but my faith is the driving force. Working for the cathedral has done something for me. I'm a better Muslim than I was 10 years ago, because I question my faith. I do not question God but I question in order to learn.

My Prophet is the role model who we cannot live up to. My son has certain issues, where he wants to do certain things, and I'd rather he didn't do those things – but my Prophet is my yardstick. I tell him, if the Prophet will allow those things, do it, if not, don't do it. Life is so simple, I don't know why people complicate it.

### **You say you don't question God. Why is that?**

I am not paid enough to question God for goodness sake! That's his job, let him get on with it. I usually say to my Christian friends that we will never agree on the status of Jesus, peace be upon him. We agree he was born, we believe in the immaculate conception, we believe in the miracles. That he died on the cross, we will never agree; he did not die – mind, body and soul were taken by God. But we do agree that he will come back. So let him come back, let God decide. Until then we don't have to fight, we can be friends.

### **How do you feel about Christianity, having learned more about it through your work?**

I just wish the Christians could go back to the scriptures and live Christianity, because I think Christianity has been so diluted. Christianity for me has become separate from the lived experience. We have academised it, and I don't want that to happen to Islam. Islam must be a lived faith.

### **What do you mean by academised? Too much studying of it?**

No, there can never be enough study. What I mean is that I find sometimes in Christianity that people talk, but I don't see the lived experience of Jesus. Jesus, he's my prophet, he lives in my heart too remember.

Muslims don't always live the faith either, they have privatised it for themselves. This is a problem we have, we are constantly privatising the faith. Tom Wright talks about how we try to turn religion into our patio. The garden has been made into a patio, but the grass does come through.

### **Would it be better for world peace if there was just one religion, a general belief in God and love?**

For me there is only one faith: that is belief in one God. But I believe faith has come to us piecemeal. Moses and Jesus and all these prophets have been part of my life so I follow all that. But just as you don't expect a five year-old child to do a Phd, so understanding and developing in people has come piecemeal through time. For me, Islam is the final chapter, and that is my guideline.

So why can't we just get rid of Judaism and Christianity and Islam and just have one God? Well that's exactly what has happened! When you have a computer book and it's updated, well that's what Islam is – it is the updated version, the final chapter.

For me, Christians have stuck at this particular chapter, they haven't moved. All I'm saying to my Christian friends is, read the final chapter, accept it.

### **Will the church and the mosque ever sit happily together side by side in the UK?**

Not in my lifetime, but I am never without hope. Without hope I cannot believe in my God. Once I went to a Roman Catholic school and the first thing they asked is, why are you wearing that thing on your head? And at this particular school there was a very beautiful Madonna, and I said to them: "You're Roman Catholic aren't you?" They said: "Oh yes!" And I said: "Well I am a better Roman Catholic than you."

They were stunned and I said: "Well look, what is Lady Mary wearing?" They looked at Lady Mary and they looked at me and said: "She is wearing a blue headscarf."

I said: "OK, I'm wearing a different colour. She is my role model. I am trying to live up to those high standards, are you?"

Later I received a letter from a little girl in year six, she had drawn a picture of two women wearing headscarves, one was labelled Mary and by the other she had written, "This is you Anjum."

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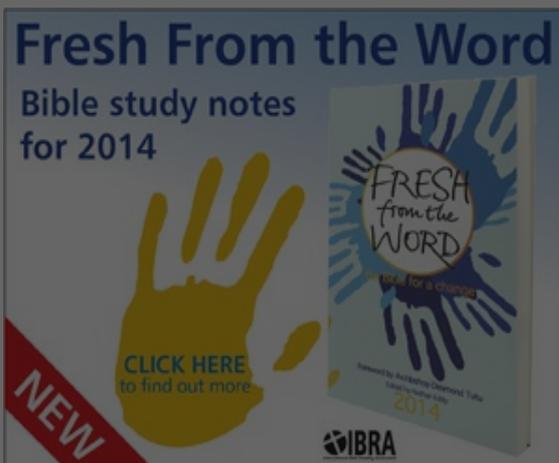
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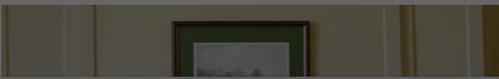
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