

Barnabas Aid Director Answers 'Preacher of Hate' Accusation

On Sept. 9, The Guardian newspaper in the U.K. published an article by Mehdi Hasan, senior political editor of the New Statesman, entitled "How Fear of Criminalization Forces Muslims Into Silence." This contained a number of specific and personal criticisms of Barnabas Aid's International director, Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo.

This is not the first time in the recent past that this newspaper has published a biased piece highly critical of Sookhdeo's work (see also this 2009 blog post by Andrew Brown). But on this occasion he has requested and been given the right of reply, and a shorter and significantly edited version of the article below has been published by The Guardian.

Allegations such as those in the original article imply that highlighting the causes of anti-Christian hostility and speaking out for the freedom of oppressed Christians in Muslim-majority countries (especially converts from Islam to Christianity) amount to hate speech, and so can be used to discredit our advocacy on behalf of the persecuted church.

Some points we would have liked to make had to be excluded from that piece for reasons of space or editorial policy, so we are now releasing this fuller version to our supporters.

In his recent article, Mehdi Hasan refers to me as a "rightwing ideologue," a "crude, anti-Islam propagandist" and a "preacher of hate and division." I want to respond here not only to these specific and personal charges, but also to the social and political claims that he deduces from them.

At the personal level, Mehdi Hasan does not, in fact, provide much of a case for me to answer. The only evidence he cites to

support his allegations are the brief references to me in the manifesto of Anders Breivik, the Norwegian mass killer, and a few short quotes from my books. But given the wide range of sources quoted by Breivik, his references to my writings are hardly definite proof of right-wing extremism. And I am content for those who have taken the trouble to study those writings in any detail to judge whether I deserve the epithets applied to me in the article.

More needs to be said, however. Mehdi Hasan suggests that Muslims in Britain today are victims of “negative stereotypes” and “demonization.” Yet he is himself prepared to use equally negative stereotypes to demonize those, including myself, who offer an understanding of contemporary Islam that is different from his own. His strategy is a common one: to defend a weakly supported opinion by accusing his opponents of extremism. But although this may give a spurious respectability to his view, it provides no defense against the serious criticisms that may be brought against that view.

I yield to no one in my abhorrence of anti-Muslim prejudice, bigotry and hatred in all its forms, and I am on record as speaking out forcefully against it. I have also worked hard on a number of occasions for the causes of endangered and oppressed Muslim minorities. Sheikh Dr. Muhammad Al-Hussaini, director of Abraham House in the U.K., has issued a response ([read here](#)) to Mehdi Hasan’s article in which he refers to my campaigning to defend Muslims in the Balkans from slaughter by the Serbs, my defense of Muslims suffering violence in India, and the protection by the church that I then led of a London mosque at a time of anti-Muslim hostility. I count Dr. Al-Hussaini, and many other moderate and liberal Muslims, among my close friends.

But there is a crucial difference between anti-Muslim hatred and legitimate criticism of the religion of Islam. Like any other ideology, Islam must be open to being critiqued, and where its political aspects appear to pose a challenge to

fundamental Western values, these issues must be discussed openly and responsibly, without the debate being obscured by charges of "Islamophobia". It must also be possible to comment on the behavior of individual Muslims where this contravenes our society's basic norms, without being accused of racism or bigotry.

On YouTube videos Mehdi Hasan appears to refer to non-Muslims and atheists in very derogatory terms: "cattle," "animals," "people of no intelligence" and even *kuffar*, a grossly offensive term applied by some Muslims to non-Muslims. (Some of his fellow-Shia Muslims even apply it to Sunni Muslims.) Admittedly, the context of these comments is unclear, but if he expects to enjoy the freedom to use such terms, I wonder on what basis he can argue for the silencing of reasoned and courteous voices that challenge certain aspects of contemporary Islam. I wonder, also, whether *The Guardian* would have published an article by someone who had seemingly called Muslims "cattle" or "of no intelligence". Indeed, I wonder if that person would not be reported to the appropriate authorities or even to the police.

Mehdi Hasan queries the influence given to me by Western governments. The political and military leaders who have found my insights worthy of attention can speak for themselves. My work with the armed forces has been focused on facilitating understanding of and dialogue with Muslims, and it has taken place in the context of peace and community relations. This should perhaps be enough at least to gain my views a fair hearing, from anyone not invincibly prejudiced against them.

And there is in fact plenty of evidence from both Muslim and secular sources to support those views. Some parts of the Muslim community really are becoming increasingly isolated from other people, creating enclaves where they live largely according to their own rules. Smaller, more radical elements really do advocate—quite openly—a fully Islamic society under the rule of sharia law. As a result, some areas of British

society really are being subtly but progressively Islamized. This process is not an invention of a few “anti-Islam propagandists”; it is a well-documented and significant social change that deserves, indeed demands, a fair-minded debate. I suggest that Mehdi Hasan’s unwillingness even to acknowledge its existence raises questions about his own credibility as a commentator.

I close with a personal note. I am a convert from Islam, and all schools of Islamic law prescribe the death penalty for an adult male Muslim who chooses to leave his faith. Having lived under this death sentence for my entire adult life, I am acutely aware of the plight of apostates from Islam in some Muslim-majority contexts, where they are at real risk of violence or even murder. Even as I write, an Iranian pastor, Youcef Nadarkhani, is on death row in Iran, and may be executed any day. If I had no other reason to speak or write about Islam, then giving these vulnerable people a voice in the West, where their suffering is so often ignored, would be reason enough. My unshakable commitment to liberal Western values requires nothing less.

I am surprised that *The Guardian* newspaper, which claims to recognize fundamental freedoms and presents itself as a paragon of virtue in this respect, appears to be so little concerned with human rights and freedom of conscience when it comes to Christians far away in non-Western contexts.

Patrick Sookhdeo is the director of the Institute for the Study of Islam and Christianity and international director of the Barnabas Fund. He was born in Guyana (then British Guiana) in 1947, from a South Asian background, and was brought up as a Muslim.