



British Council launches alternative to the “clash of civilisations”
Have you ever had a Muslim to dinner?
Muslims are part of Europe and there will not be a future without them.
This is the key idea of a long-term project launched in Brussels.

Alexandra Lucas Coelho in Brussels, November 2009

Douglas Murray has opinions. Islam is racist, sexist and homophobic. Islam is sadist and Europe masochist. Islam will ruin Europe’s values if Europe doesn’t do something about it.

But who is Douglas Murray? He is the “only British neoconservative”, an Anglican who became “an atheist after studying Islam”, a gay who can’t “hold hands with his boyfriend” in public without hearing passing remarks from “immigrants”.

This Thursday he was one of the leading personalities in a debate in Brussels about the relationship between Europe and its Muslims.

This debate marked the launch of a response to the “clash of civilisations” thesis. The project is called *Our Shared Europe* and is a British Council initiative estimated to reach a target audience of one hundred thousand next-generation “influential and innovative” people, including five thousand decision-makers. The project will take place in the next few years throughout Europe, Turkey and Northern Africa.

The key idea is that there is no “us” and “them”, as “Muslims are an integral part of Europe’s past, present and future”. Not only are sixteen million Muslims European citizens, but Muslims have also contributed to the modern matrix of Europe for centuries, and the future will be a common one or none at all.

In order to set up a programme to launch this message, the British Council spent two years listening to suggestions, criticism and doubts from academics, politicians, activists and students in several countries.

Many will see Douglas Murray’s opinions as insults or nonsense, but Martin Rose, *Our Shared Europe*’s mentor and director, is not concerned with “preaching to the converted”; hence his proposal for Conservative Groups from the European Parliament to host the initial debate, and so Murray was one of the participants invited.

Islamaphobia, yes or no

Do we really have a common Europe? Was Shada Islam’s, the debate moderator, opening question to the four participants. Chris Allen, a British academic who wrote a report on islamaphobia for the EU, said yes. “Different experiences don’t mean we can’t share a territory. There are also big differences between Swedes and Greeks and they are all Europeans.”

The British conservative Daniel Hannan MEP focused on home. He argued that Britain “has always had a civic rather than an ethnic concept of citizenship” and that “it’s the best country in Europe for a Muslim”, which implies loyalty: “We can’t be loyal to England while being loyal to some foreign prince.”

Bashy Quraishy, an anti-racism activist who grew up in Pakistan and now lives in Denmark, suggested this debate should take place in all national parliaments: “I come from Denmark and we really need it”. He then deconstructed the idea that there is “one” Islam or “one” Muslim community: “Muslims in Europe come from more than 60 nationalities and are as diverse as other Europeans. I don’t believe they want a separate identity. They just want to be left in peace: to

have children, a house, work. I want to be European if Europe will allow it.” But “Europe’s goodwill is increasingly diminishing”.

This is where Douglas Murray entered the debate: “You speak as if the identity problem is Europe’s and not Islam’s! The idea of islamaphobia is very useful for extremists that try to reduce this to a problem of racism.” It is Islam that discriminates, starting with women or the right to refuse the religion one is born into, accused Murray. “And instead of integrating we are separating Islam, with special rights.”

Perhaps islamaphobia “is not the ideal word”, argues Chris Allen, as it can mean different things: “verbal or physical abuse, mosque arson”. But we should not abolish the term altogether because all of those things exist. And the media have a responsibility in this. Between 1996 and 2006, “coverage of Muslims increased 70%, and 91% of that coverage was negative”.

Douglas Murray thinks it’s natural. “How can you have positive coverage of someone who wants to blow himself up?”

Bashy Quraishy called him ignorant: “Blame the people that practice the religion, not religion itself.”

From the audience there were questions about everything, from the Mohammed cartoons to the Archbishop of Canterbury, from Bin Laden to the Holocaust, including lots of media criticism. A student talked about assimilation as an alternative to radicalisation.

“I don’t believe in that terminology”, replied Bashy. “Radicalisation is often a reaction to the way people are treated. Assimilation means throwing identity out of the window, submerging it. I believe in mutual integration. Equal rights, equal treatment before the law, equal responsibility.”

Douglas stood firm: Islam wants special treatment. “Nothing I have heard will change my hatred of Islam’s racism.”

“We are talking about people who are mistreated”, not about Islam, insisted Chris Allen. We need to “separate that from theology.”

Another dozen arms were raised in the audience, and there were still Martin Rose’s final remarks to come.

“This is about people, not religions”, he summed up. “When we look away from the individual level, we’re probably making a mistake. I’m not very pleased with the word islamaphobia, but it does exist. There is an acute risk of separation; we don’t know our fellow Europeans as well as we should,” and he gave the example of the Englishman who, after the London bombings, realised he had never had a Muslim to dinner.”

Martin Rose

Once, when he was a boy Martin Rose came across an atlas that showed the Muslim conquests in the Middle Ages. The Arab territories were enormous; Europe paled in comparison. That was when he realised that the world looks very different depending on where you stand.

The same happens with Historical narratives. One of the problems in the relationship of Europe and its Muslims is that the narratives told about them are very different from the narratives they tell about themselves.

What Martin Rose intends is “to create a new and powerful narrative for Europe” that recognises the history of empires as belonging to all its heirs. Europe certainly has Judaeo-Christian roots but it also has Islamic-Christian roots, and to minimize the Muslim contribution to the history of Europe “has nothing to with the truth and everything to do with power”, he wrote in his lecture *A Shared Past for a Shared Future* published by The Association of Muslim Social Scientists of the UK.

A historian trained in Oxford, specialising in Middle Eastern Studies, Martin Rose has been with the British Council for twenty years, some of which he spent in Baghdad, and it was while there that “he discovered time moves at different speeds in different places.”

When polls show British Muslims as being opposed to homosexuality and sex outside marriage, it doesn't make Martin think of another civilisation, it makes him think of Britain in the 50s.

We are the same civilisation at “two speeds”, and the only way out is to get closer “with no arrogance regarding the speed of progress because we haven't got the monopoly on morality”. Our past “is often other people's present, and it's easier for the strong to leave history behind”, but “history doesn't go away, it goes underground”. When Algerians emigrated to France, and Indians, Pakistanis or Bangladeshis to Britain, it was history returning. It's a shared history and that's why we should say “we”, a “generous we”. Accommodating to each other, not capitulating. This concerns as much the French and the English as it does the Portuguese since we are all sitting at that “collective dinner table”, and this is how his project *Our Shared Europe* should be viewed - “A familiarisation process through the arts, education, youth projects, exhibitions and texts”. In concrete and exhibition about the contribution of Muslims to the European culture, artists and youth exchanges, teaching materials and curricula revisions. After Brussels, there are debates planned for Lisbon, London and Glasgow.

AbdoolKarim Vakil

O PÚBLICO met AbdoolKarim Vakil, a lecturer at King's College London and representative of the Lisbon Islamic Community at the debate in Brussels. He is the only Portuguese on the list of the dozens of people that have contributed to *Our Shared Europe* since 2007.

AbdoolKarim Vakil took part in the project and has admired Martin Rose's work for years but after the debate he had doubts about the effectiveness of what had taken place.

Was the British context excessive by referring to the Archbishop of Canterbury's statements on *sharia* and to other British debates? Wasn't the European parliament too closed a venue for such a debate? Was there enough time for the audience to participate?

“The issue is whether it was worth it or not. A debate needs active participation to produce an effect and allow points of view to evolve. In this case, there were opinions that polarised the debate”, namely those of the neo-conservative MEP Douglas Murray. “A little humour and a controversial opinion is always interesting, but it doesn't help further the debate.”

Vakil is co-organising a volume on islamophobia that will have the contribution of around 30 authors and is coming out in January in the US and in the UK. He has heard Douglas Murray and the arguments against him before, so hearing him in Brussels was nothing new. But opinions such as his can be heard on the streets, on the Internet and among specialists, and it's those people that Martin Rose wants to reach.

One of the main points for Vakil is that the term islamophobia corresponds to a reality, and that explains its acceptance. “Many people who use it agree it is not ideal. What matters though is that it was adopted by activists who were looking for a concrete word to describe the discrimination they felt.”

It's not an old phenomenon; it started at the beginning of the 20th Century and was dormant until the 90s when it came back. It corresponds to “a racialisation of the Islamic community”. For AbdoolKarim Vakil, that's what happened with the Mohammed cartoons. “It was not about freedom of speech, it was about racism”.