

Achievements of the Woking Muslim Mission

*Speech at a public meeting on Saturday 23rd April, 2005
at the New Haw Community Centre near Woking*

by Dr. Zahid Aziz

Note: On Saturday 23rd April 2005 a public meeting took place at the New Haw Community Centre, Addlestone, Surrey, near Woking, between 3.00 and 6.00 p.m., arranged by the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha‘at Islam Lahore (U.K.). It was in honour of the visit to the U.K. of Dr. Abdul Karim Saeed from Pakistan, the International Head of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement. The audience included non-Muslim, English friends from the area. Among those present was the local Member of Parliament, Mr. Philip Hammond. On the stage, alongside the speakers, was the Mayor of Woking Mr. Graham Cundy. Given below is the text of the speech delivered by Dr. Zahid Aziz.

Respected head of our Movement (*Hazrat Ameer* Dr. Abdul Karim Saeed), distinguished ladies and gentleman, brothers and sisters — my greetings to you all and *As-salamu alaikum*.

How to be British and Muslim

The theme of my speech originally was to be “how Muslims in this country can both live as Muslims who are true to their faith and as useful, loyal citizens of the community and country”. Then I thought I might illustrate some of the things I was going to say on that topic by dealing with the work of the Woking Muslim Mission which was conducted by our movement from the Woking Mosque from 1913 till the mid-1960’s. I have prepared a leaflet based on my talk but I have not distributed it in advance because my experiences from past occasions show that people, rather than listening, start reading the handout.

If I were to ask you whether there was a Muslim member of the Surrey Home Guard during the Second World War, who moreover received an MBE for his service in the Home Guard, I think most people would find it unbelievable that there could have existed such a man. But this is in fact quite true and the gentleman in question was one Major J.W.B. Farmer who had become a Muslim through the Woking Muslim Mission, and at one stage lived on Oriental Road, near the Mosque. Having served in the First World War, he was during the Second World War in the Surrey Home Guard. He died in

1966 and I learned recently that he received an MBE when honours were awarded at the end of the war. I also then confirmed this by finding his name on the Home Guard website.

Major J.W.B. Farmer, even as indicated by his name and also by his appearance and bearing in his photographs, was I suppose as quintessential an Englishman as there could be, who served his country and community, yet he was a Muslim at the same time. The people in this country who became converts to Islam through the Woking Muslim Mission from 1913 onwards showed how a person could combine being a Muslim with being British in the best possible sense. It is difficult to define what being British means, but I leave it at being British in the best possible sense and in the highest traditions of this country. They showed that one could be a practising Muslim and yet belong to this country in every good sense. One Woking convert was an aristocrat by the name of Lord Headley. He and many such converts were mature people, well-established in their walks of life, when they became Muslims. They belonged either to the educated sections of the country or upper strata of society. They were not disaffected, rebellious youth who accepted Islam in order to rebel against the prevailing society. Lord Headley was some 58 years of age when he accepted Islam, and was a man of wide experience in many walks of life and a civil Engineer by profession. In an article in the *Guardian* newspaper about mosques in this country, while mentioning the Woking Mosque, it is stated:

“The Woking Mission had been a meeting of high minds, with great learning and a degree of wealth and culture.” (Online edition, 17 June 2002)

The “wealth” part does not carry any importance with us, I may add.

Features of Islam attractive to converts

I will now mention some of the features of Islam which these Woking converts said attracted them to Islam. One point they often mention in their accounts of conversion is that the basic beliefs of the religion of Islam and its concept of God are simple, rational and clear to understand and can be explained by logic and reason. They are not dogmas and mysteries which you are forced to accept even if they go against reason. Another feature which they mention is that the practices of Islam, for example prayers, are marked by simplicity and don't involve elaborate rituals and ceremonies, and that all of these institutions of Islam remove social distinctions among Muslims.

Then these converts, in their various accounts over the years, also say that what attracted them was that the teachings of Islam are broadminded and tolerant, and proclaim that God sent His Prophets and revealed His message to

all nations whose religions preceded Islam. We are required to believe in the truth of the Biblical Prophets, and are required to believe in Jesus as a true prophet and messenger of God. Moreover, God is fair and equitable to all. He does not have one favourite religion all of whose adherents, without exception, are the saved ones regardless of what they do, irrespective of their actions, while everyone else, not belonging to that faith, however good he or she may be, is doomed to hell. This is where the teachings of Islam are broadminded and tolerant.

St George, Patron Saint of England

Yesterday, when I was searching on the Internet for the location of this community centre at New Haw (Addlestone, Surrey), I found a link to the website of the Mayor's office where there was a list of your engagements and I understand that this evening you are going to a St. George's Day function.* So that led me to look up some information about St. George. The real St. George lived apparently in the third century C.E. and was born in Turkey. The mythical slaying of the dragon took place in Libya, it seems. He is said to have been beheaded in Rome for his Christian beliefs on 23rd April 303 and thus is regarded as a Christian martyr. He is the patron saint not only of England but also of several other countries including Palestine. Now the serious point here is this. I have already said that Muslims accept Jesus as a true Prophet of God. But our religion also teaches us that the early followers of all the prophets were following their teachings correctly and accurately. Therefore we not only revere and respect the Biblical prophets but also the early followers of those prophets as being on the right path. According to the teachings of Islam, the Christian religion for the first 300 years followed what we Muslims regard as the true, original teachings of Jesus, that is to believe in one God and to believe in Jesus as prophet and messenger. So on this basis, just as Moses and Jesus are prophets in Muslim belief, St. George can be accepted as a saint according to our beliefs. Therefore the celebration of St. George's Day as the patron saint of England is not at all something that Muslims would find in conflict with their religion. On the contrary, we too can commemorate his martyrdom, as we find it consistent with our religion to hold that St. George served the true religion of God. Usually, people try to highlight differences between communities and try to accentuate them. But here we find the common ground, that Muslims can also respect and revere the patron saint of England and accept him as a saint and martyr.

* *Footnote:* I was addressing here the Mayor of Woking, Councillor Graham Cundy, who was on the platform.

As we can see, Islam creates a universal brotherhood of people of all countries, races, classes etc. and that is the kind of teaching of Islam that these converts found appealing. Other features of Islam that they said attracted them are its encouragement of the pursuit of knowledge and the development of science and its promotion of democracy and social equality.

Another message which was broadcast distinctively from the Woking Muslim Mission was that the fundamental teachings of Islam unite all Muslims and that any religious differences between the various sects of Islam are of a secondary nature and should be kept at that level. There must be mutual tolerance and respect among Muslims themselves for such differences in their own ranks. Sectarian divisiveness amongst Muslims was abhorred in the message of the Woking Mission.

The message of Islam emanating from the Woking Mission reached all over the English speaking world, including U.S.A., Africa, Australia, the West Indies, Singapore, etc. The name Woking, you would be surprised to hear, became well-known in small and remote places in distant Muslims countries. Through reading the literature from the Woking Mission they knew that Woking is a town about 25 miles South-West of London. Events at the Mosque were filmed by the British Pathe newsreel film company and the newsreel clips they produced are still available for viewing from the website of British Pathe News. The earliest film clip is from 1919 which is, of course, silent. Then there are others from the 1920's and 30's. There is one clip from 1954 which has a full sound commentary.

At the Woking Mosque and Mission, Muslim nationalist leaders and intellectuals visiting this country used to meet and discuss plans for future of their countries and the forthcoming independence that they looked forward to during the 1920's and 1930's. Even the name 'Pakistan' was devised as a result of meetings of Indian Muslim students in this country, held initially at the Woking Mission in 1932.

Central London Mosque

Moving to the present day, the Central London Mosque in Regents Park, London, owes its origin to the Woking Muslim Mission. The plan to build a mosque in Central London was proposed by Lord Headley during the First World War. He argued that it would be the pride of the British Empire to have a large mosque in the centre of London, especially after he saw the mosque in Paris. Later he created a trust in the late 1920s and land was bought by this trust in West Kensington in London near the Olympia Exhibition Centre (in Mornington Avenue, which I have visited two or three times). Even the foundation stone of the mosque was laid in 1937, after Lord Headley's death.

Then the Second World War broke out and in 1940 it was suggested to Churchill's wartime cabinet that since Muslims in the British empire, especially in India, were supporting the war effort of Britain, it would be opportune to give them a piece of land in central London for building a mosque. This proposal was discussed at the highest levels in the British government in June 1940. Shortly afterwards, land in Regents Park was presented as a gift by the government to the "Muslim Community in the U.K." and the property and assets of the earlier trust (whose original trustees were Lord Headley and Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din) were incorporated into the new London Central Mosque Trust, which today controls the Central London Mosque.

Conclusion

The success of the Woking Muslim Mission was not due to any building or its location but due to the distinctive ideas and beliefs and concepts broadcast from there and the vision, determination and sacrifices of the people who worked there. These characteristics and qualities are still to be found in the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement, by means of which we can again exert our efforts to present the tolerant and broadminded nature of Islam.

Addendum to speech

In this published version of my speech, I may add the following supporting references.

1. On the website of the Muslim Council of Britain there is a document entitled *Islam in the British Isles — Some Key Events and Dates* in which it is stated:

“1916: British Muslim Lord Headley (Al-Haj El-Farooq) writes to Secretary of State Austen Chamberlain for allocation of state funds for the purchase and construction of a mosque in London ‘in memory of Muslim soldiers who died fighting for the Empire’.

1928: Formation of the London Nizamiah Mosque Trust Fund by Al-Haj El-Farooq; these funds were subsequently transferred to the London Central Mosque Fund (present day Islamic Cultural Centre in Regents Park).”

(www.mcb.org.uk/scrd181298.html)

2. The website of the present-day Woking Mosque expresses the following view about the work of Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din:

“One of the things that is impressive about this early movement, and for this the Khwaja must take the credit, was the simplicity of the message. It is evident that this is one of the things that were most influential in persuading converts to adopt Islam. He preached a message that was free of cultural baggage, a pure message based on faith and belief that encompassed the spirit of Islam. He was always positive, always gentle and always good-natured. It was obvious that he embodied many of the qualities that believers would expect in a man of faith; peacefulness, kindness and a quiet certainty, but [which they] failed to witness in the clergy, where dogma and the ecclesiastical hierarchy were the dominant features.”

(www.wokingmosque.org.uk/history.htm)