

Response to recent articles in the *Sun* and the *Times***Ibrahim Hewitt**

The *Sun* and the *Times* newspapers both published articles and, in the *Sun*'s case, an editorial, on Saturday 25 July 2015 in which I was described variously as "Corbyn's vile pal", "Corbyn's pal hate cleric" and a "hate preacher". It is stated baldly in both newspapers that I am an "Islamic extremist"; the only evidence for this are statements from a book written by me more than 20 years ago and another part-statement from an article which has been chosen to show me in an unfavourable light. My response is as follows:

The purpose of the articles was clearly to damage Labour Party leadership candidate Jeremy Corbyn MP by showing what "bad" company he keeps; Mr Corbyn has described me as a "very good friend" and both newspapers have used this as an opportunity not only to attack Jeremy Corbyn but also regurgitate old stories about me. Two charities which I chair – Interpal and Al-Aqsa Schools Trust – have been dragged into the mire.

With regards to Interpal, it is pointed out that the US "designated" the charity as a "terrorist" entity in 2003 and that Interpal "denies this". It is not disclosed that the British charity, which has provided humanitarian support to Palestinians in need for 20 years, was cleared by the Charity Commission in February 2009, after a two and a half year inquiry, of inappropriate or biased distribution of aid.

The inquiry found that "there has been nothing brought to the inquiry's attention that suggests that the charity's funding has been siphoned off for inappropriate or non-charitable purposes." The report went on to say that "Interpal did maintain clear financial audit trails in their delivery of aid for humanitarian purposes." Moreover, "allegations of bias in the distribution of aid were unfounded." The charity was told that it is "entitled to operate and to operate specifically in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and is entitled to continue to do so."

Interpal absolutely denies that it has ever funded Hamas. The US has never produced evidence for the "terrorist entity" designation, even when requested to do so by the Charity Commission and the British government. There has never been any due process or open opportunity to answer specific charges or challenge evidence.

Lawyers in the US, acting on behalf of Interpal, are currently taking up the designation directly with the US Treasury to have it removed; it is a long, slow and costly process. Unofficially, it has been inferred to the trustees that as this was a "political decision" it will require a political decision to remove the designation. Thirty-eight Members of Parliament signed an Early Day Motion in December 2013 calling on the British government to approach the US authorities with a view to lifting the order. The government has ignored this.

I wrote a book in 1994 which is a collection of short statements on "What does Islam say?" as a guide for GCSE students; subsequent editions of the book had other contributors who were not named. For 20 years, up to January this year, there have been no complaints to the publisher as far as I am aware, and certainly none to me about the content of the book, which is now out of print with no plans to reprint any further editions. I do not "advocate" violence or witch hunts against homosexuals (or anyone else). I profoundly disagree with any calls for violence against homosexuals. I have made it quite clear that, "the sexual preferences of homosexuals are none of my business."

In that book, the question of adultery and apostasy is dealt with on the basis of a Prophetic saying in two key texts after the Holy Qur'an. There are texts in the Old Testament that call for equally draconian punishment. These do not mean that I would advocate such actions. Of course I do not; if I did, I would rightly be arrested for doing so.

Both the *Sun* and the *Times* refer to me as either a "cleric" or a "preacher" or both, when, in fact, I am neither. Nor was I a full-time "musician" before becoming a Muslim. I was, however, a member of the Territorial Army and served as a Bandsman in the Royal Northumberland Fusiliers and the Band of the Royal Yeomanry (Inns of Court and City Yeomanry). I am proud of having served Queen and country in this small way.

No journalist from the *Sun* or the *Times* attempted to speak to me about the articles prior to publication, so I was not afforded the opportunity of giving my side of the story. This is hardly fair and balanced journalism.

The *Times* journalist repeats a previous accusation that Al-Aqsa School's "child protection policies have been criticised by Ofsted inspectors for being run on the basis of Sharia law." This is simply not true, as was made very clear in a public statement at the time.

School policy has not, and has never been, run on the basis of Sharia law". Like all policies at the school, 'safeguarding children' is based on the regulations required by law for the school to follow. Ofsted's own guidance for its inspectors stresses that the requirement for schools to "*draw attention to the importance attached to secular, rather than religious law*" but "*this is not incompatible with encouraging pupils to respect religious law, if the school's ethos is faith-based.*"

The school seeks to ensure that pupils are aware of the differences between religious and secular law in Britain, as the Ofsted guidance recommends. As a faith school, moreover, why is it so wrong for this difference to be reflected in a school policy? Documentation produced by the Catholic Education Service on such matters is "*approved by the Bishops of England and Wales*"; why shouldn't a Muslim school seek guidance and approval from Islamic scholars?

With regards to the mention of a statement made by me in a book review, that "the word integration doesn't even belong in a true democracy", this was actually a quote from a French-Algerian academic who argued that citizens in a democracy should be entitled to be whatever they want as long as they obey the law of the land, so the notion of "integration" should actually be an alien concept in a truly democratic society. I usually follow this quote by saying that "interaction" with wider society is the best course of action for Muslims to take.

I believe, therefore, that to label me as an "extremist" defies logic. Indeed emotive language, as used in the Murdoch press to demonise me, is an encouragement to violence and bigotry against the Muslim community leading to hate mail that we now send routinely to the police.