**RUMAISA’S ZUBERI’S SPEECH**

Hi everyone, thanks for the opportunity to speak with you all today about what being a young person of faith is like today in Scotland.

I am a Muslim. I believe that a Loving, Merciful, Knowing God created the universe and all the souls, to whom he asked ‘Am I not your Lord?’. All the souls replied ‘Yes, we bear witness’.

As we were born we left that perfect spiritualrealm where everyone knew God, and entered the worldlyrealm. But we remember the perfection that our souls have tasted, and so we chase desire within this world. God sent down the way to know him again through messengers who came with the revealed word of God such as David, Moses, Jesus and the final, our beloved Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon them all. If we follow God’s commands of developing good character and worship with sincerity - the pillars of which are: the testimony of faith, regular prayer, fasting in the month of Ramadan, donating at least 2.5% of wealth to charity and making the Hajj pilgrimage at least once if you are able but can also include things such as Quranic recitation and seeking knowledge - we can purify our souls to be more receptive to Divine grace, become content with God and He with us and come to know Him. For He is nearer to us than our very lifeblood, it is only us who have distanced ourselves from Him. And that is the true treasure of paradise, to gaze upon the countenance of the Lord.

So that’s a short summary of how I see my faith but what does that actually means for me in my day-to-day life? Well, I see faith as being an integral part of my being. I can’t separate my actions into the faithful and the faithless. The way I dress, the way I sleep, the way I eat, to the way I speak is influenced by the Quran and the Sunnah, the word of God and the exemplification of the Quran, the way of the Beloved of God. For me, this is the route to contentment in this life and the next.

And that leads to some interesting things because we live in a society in which nothing has value until you can stick a price tag on it. We are told that love is just a chemical reaction and beauty is just a label for symmetry and proportion - that if something cannot be objectively measured or quantified it does not exist.

But this neglects the idea that something transcending the material realm cannot be measured using material means. This neither means it does not exist, nor that it has no meaning, but rather it may be more real as it exists in a higher realm. My faith is not one of theoretical knowledge alone, nor one that is guided by pure emotion and subjective feeling, but Islam joins both knowledge in it’s traditional sense and experience. For instance, the Quran encourages us to reflect on the universe  - ‘’Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the night and the day are signs for those of understanding’’ (3.190). Reflection helps us understand the workings and mechanisms of the world around us as well to innovate, using our knowledge for good. The Islamic Golden Age, the development of algebra, the dissemination of Greek texts and the Arabic names of stars are all a testament to the power of reflecting on the world around.

Reflection is also a means of inspiring a change within ourselves. The more we understand, the more we realise that for all our grandiose ideas, we are just a tiny speck rotating on this watery rocky globe, all our affairs in the hand of the One to whom belong the heavens and the earth.

In our world of constant information overload everyone is trying to tell you something or sell you something and without a rational, strong foundation to remind you of the bigger picture, it's easy to feel confused and ultimately powerless. In this confusing storm my faith provides direction and anchors me to what I know to be real.

For me there’s great joy in faith. The main joy is coming to know God, knowing my purpose in life. Being part of a faith community reminds me that we have so much capacity for good when we come together. GUMSA, the Muslim students’ society on campus raised just under £4000 for orphans and needy children over the course of 2 weeks this year. This is broke students coming together, giving of their money, their time, their creative minds to make this campaign the success it was. GUMSA holds community dinners every year - last year an interfaith dinner for 250 people in Islam Awareness week and an iftar in ramadan for 400 people. The Arabic word ‘barakah’ is usually translated as blessing but connotes increase and happiness and means the establishment of divine goodness in something. From where it comes cannot be sensed nor quantified but barakah is a what enters a thing when you do it for the right reasons. And when people get together to do something that looks beyond themselves there is barakah, and that is a wondrous thing.

But there are also challenges to being a young person of faith. The main challenge, and this is what the Beloved of God described as the ‘greater struggle,’ is the battle against ego. It’s striving for good character, pushing myself to be the best I can be. Giving without expecting return, remaining calm in the face of anger and putting my time to use in service instead of wasting it, juggling different commitments and all while trying to avoid heedlessness by constantly remembering God. That’s the real struggle. It’s smiling at the quizzical faces in the public bathroom as my foot is in the sink to perform ablution before prayers. I often feel the responsibility, which is also a privilege, of being a standard bearer for my faith. As a hijab wearing woman, I can’t escape from the religious ambiguity that my male counterparts afford and so it sometimes feel everyone is watching me through the lens of my Muslimness.

But I am so so so grateful to all the people at various venues I have asked for a place to pray and they have found me rooms, unlocked doors, given me breaks for prayer. I’m grateful to all the people who show understanding, who listen to what I have to say (like you guys - thanks!). I’m grateful that most times we manage to live together side-by-side in perfect harmony. And there are perfect examples of this, just take a trip to the southside and eat a haggis pakora!

I’m also grateful that in Scotland women are not required to remove clothing they feel comfortable in. But when the prime minister describes women of your faith as ‘bank robbers’ and ‘letter boxes’, it doesn’t exactly make you feel as if you belong. It’s at times like these when I feel most other and forget that in the words of poet Suhaiymah Manzoor Khan, ’Britain is bismillah. Britain is basmati rice. Britain is box braids and black barber shops. Britain is Bollywood and bhangara.’ After the Christchurch attack in New Zealand last year, there was a 600% rise in reported Islamphobic hate crimes in the UK. Reading statistics like these is disappointing and unfortunately incidents where I’m reminded that everyone is not so tolerant are not so infrequent.

Growing up I was aware, at different times more acutely, of my identity as a person of colour and part of a minority faith group. As a child, I was always happy to answer my classmates questions about my culture but as I grew older, something changed. Instead of my peers being open about the natural human curiosity when it comes to differences, I noticed that people tended to avoid seeking clarity and instead carried their presumptions with them. This manifests as non-inclusion and the odd remark which you don’t quite know how to respond to in the moment.

I wish there was more opportunity for interfaith dialogue in schools because interfaith is about understanding other people, other perspectives. It’s not about erasing differences, but embracing them. It’s about understanding people so that you can see a person and not a label, judgement or stereotype. Most importantly, interfaith is a chance to eat delicious food! I’d also like to mention that intrafaith dialogue is incredibly important and I think there's a lot of healing that needs to be done within faith communities.

Young Muslims are very diverse and so I don’t claim to speak on behalf of anyone else, just to share a few of my own thoughts. I hope I've managed to convey a flavour of what my faith means to me and what it's like to be a young person of faith in Scotland.

*Rumaisa Zuberi*