

# THREE FAITHS FORUM



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## Jack Straw Speaks On Equality and Social Justice

The Rt Hon Jack Straw was unapologetic about his comments on Muslim women and the veil when he addressed an audience of 250 at a joint meeting arranged by the Three Faiths Forum (Muslim-Christian-Jewish dialogue) and the City Circle (of young Muslim professionals) held at the Darwin Lecture Theatre, at University College London on the 2nd November.

Jack Straw expressed surprise "that the column I wrote regarding the wearing of the veil has created such a furore".

He spoke of the importance of the Muslim community integrating but not assimilating, that differences should not be tolerated but celebrated. In referring to the common desire for integration of movements led by Luther King and Nelson Mandela, Mr Jack Straw stressed concern for common values of fairness, equality and social justice. He pointed out that when he asked a constituent wearing the veil at his constituency surgery to remove it, this was only a request and no more. He only made it if a female member of staff was present. He underlined his sensitivity regarding problems concerned with faith and stressed the necessity of communication and dialogue.

Sir Sigmund Sternberg, Co-founder of the Three Faiths Forum, in his opening remarks said that "there were few in government who knew the Muslim community better than the Lord Privy Seal. As MP for Blackburn and previously as Home Secretary and Foreign Secretary, two of the four most important seats in Cabinet, he has interacted positively over many years with Muslim leaders and communities". "Jack Straw" said Sir Sigmund "speaks bluntly and openly and the only common denominator is mutual respect".

The young Muslim professionals of the City Circle who made up the majority of the audience of 250 devoted nearly all their comments to strong criticism of Mr Straw's views on the veil. But some asked whether tourists in a Muslim country endeavour to comply with the custom of dressing appropriately on entering a mosque, should not Muslims also endeavour to comply with the norms of a country in which they are a minority? Jack Straw felt that it was preferable to see a person's face when having a conversation.

Sir Sigmund proposed a vote of thanks to the chairman and founder of the City Circle, Mr Asim Siddiqui and to Mr Straw for bravely agreeing to present his point of view at this ground breaking meeting. Sir Sigmund referred to the Jewish community celebrating this year 350 years of integration into British society and to the Royal Family's positive interest in interfaith activities. He also thanked Professor Malcolm Grant, Provost of University College London, for his help in making the college readily available, and Mr Mark Davies, special advisor to Mr Straw.

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