

# A Commonwealth of Pilgrims

**By RT HON BARONESS SCOTLAND OF ASTHAL QC**  
SECRETARY GENERAL, THE COMMONWEALTH



Patricia Scotland was born in Dominica and later moved to the UK with her family. Trained as a lawyer, in 1991 she became the first black woman to be appointed a Queen's Counsel. At 35 she was also the youngest woman ever to be made a QC and the first black woman to be appointed a Deputy High Court Judge. She joined the House of Lords in 1997 as Baroness Scotland of Asthal, going on

to serve as a minister in the Foreign Office, the Lord Chancellor's Department and the Home Office. She was appointed Attorney General in 2007 – the first woman to hold the post since it was created in 1315.

The Commonwealth – an association of 52 countries with a combined population of 2.4 billion citizens – comprises more than a third of the Muslim population of the world. They come from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Nigeria, Malaysia and many other countries in every continent and ocean. Even though there are no Arab-Muslim states in the Commonwealth, there are over 200 million (59 per cent) more Muslims in the Commonwealth than in the whole of the Arab world combined. This makes Makkah – the birthplace of Islam – a special place for the Commonwealth family.

A similar spirit of diversity to that which the Commonwealth itself represents can – within the Islamic context – be seen in the Holy City of Makkah, which for over fourteen centuries has been attracting pilgrims from all over the world.

Makkah is certainly one of the world's most diverse cities, with some hundred or so ethnicities representing every sect and creed of Islam living there in peace. Although exclusively Muslim, the average Makkan is just as likely to be Asian as Arab, light-skinned as dark-skinned, or to speak English as Arabic; and almost everyone who lives there is bilingual or more.

Wherever we live, learn, work or worship, there is much more we can do to build trust and understanding between people of different faiths and those of none. And given the cultural diversity of its citizens, the Commonwealth naturally acts as a bridge between all its people of faith. Each year on Commonwealth Day, a multi-faith service is held at Westminster Abbey and broadcast around the world as a testament to the inclusiveness of the Commonwealth, its common goals, and the peaceful co-existence of its people, regardless of faith.

Just as a sense of common purpose and togetherness pervades the holy city of Makkah during Hajj, on Commonwealth Day, the whole of the Commonwealth family comes together to celebrate the richness of our diversity, our spirit of respect and understanding, and the shared values and principles of our Commonwealth Charter.

We build in practical ways on what we hold in common, seeking always to find consensus as the basis for collaboration. Where we cannot find common ground, we seek to disagree well, and to agree even better where we do find concord and are able to take collective action.

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It gives me great joy when citizens of the Commonwealth play a proactive role in promoting this harmony between faiths. British citizen Professor Nasser D. Khalili, for example, has been a leading figure in promoting wider understanding of faiths and cultures, insisting that there is far more that unites us as human beings than divides us. In particular, Professor Khalili has for decades championed the cause of interfaith dialogue and understanding among the three Abrahamic faiths.

As a Jewish preserver of Islamic art, he embodies the interfaith harmony that he preaches. In the past five decades he has made it his mission to safeguard the cultural and religious heritage of Makkah through collecting, preserving and conserving over three thousand objects representing the entire history of the Holy City since the birth of Islam. His collection is acknowledged by eminent academics in the field to rank in importance alongside the collections of the Topkapi Saray Museum in Istanbul. It includes major objects, many of which are unique and irreplaceable and have no parallel in any other collection private or public. Professor Khalili's example shows that Makkah belongs to the world, and can be cherished by all.

And we are delighted to be working with the Khalili Foundation to launch our religious literacy programme – Faith in the Commonwealth. E