

UNDERSTANDING ISLAM

St. Laurence's Ludlow, 23 March 2003

Sermon by Sir Leslie Fielding, Lay Reader

“Jews call for miracles, Greeks look for wisdom ; but we proclaim Christ – yes, Christ nailed to the cross ; and though this is a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to Greeks, yet to those who have heard his call, Jews and Greeks alike, he is the power of God and the wisdom of God”. (1 Cor. 1,vv.22-24)

“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. God is Great. There is no God but God and Muhammad is his Prophet”. (Muslim “Shahada” or Profession of Faith).

Two Sundays ago, I preached from this pulpit on Saddam Hussein and Terrorism, taking – in agreement with the Bishop of Hereford – what some of us might have found a slightly “hawkish” view of what could constitute a “just war”. Today, I want to talk to you about Islam, taking what may appear, to the conservative Churchman, a somewhat “dove-ish” view.

Islam must be one of the most misunderstood religions in the world. For a millennium, Western people have cultivated a distorted image of the Muslim faith and still find it difficult to see it objectively. But if we have learnt anything from the 20th century, it is the danger of indulging cultural stereotypes of the “other” ; and this widespread Western Islamophobia must be corrected, as a Christian duty, if we are all to avoid tragedy and injustice in the future.

Yet, ignorance and prejudice continue to abound. Muslims are associated all too readily with a fearful image of unpredictable, gun-toting, terrorists. As always, Hollywood does not help. The religious “Nasty”, these days, is never a Jew, and rarely a Christian, but commonly a Muslim. Ever since the Crusades, and the expulsion of Muslims from Spain in the “Reconquista”, this sort of image has tended to stick in the Western subconscious. It has been fuelled, in our own age, by culture and sociological factors – our poor impression of the locals, or “Wogs”, in Mesopotamia, Egypt and the Canal Zone, brought back to the UK by returning servicemen. But it has also been fuelled by the intractable conflict in the Middle East between Israel and its Arab neighbours, in which the latter have until recently been generally seen as genocidal aggressors.

All this can be reciprocated. Although more familiar with Western ways than westerners are with Eastern ways, people in the Muslim world, too, sometimes have a

startlingly contorted picture of the West and what makes it tick. The soap-operatic drivel of Western TV has done little to help dispel a disdain for what is perceived as our moral decadence. There is also a purely material bias. A combination of grudging respect for, and jealous envy of, our wealth and technological advantages, can colour, the way some Muslims approach westerners ; there is a kind of secular inferiority complex at work.

Mutual incomprehension has been massively magnified since the attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, and the advent of the suicide bomber. The “Islamists” are a tiny, still unrepresentative, fraction of the Islamic world, acting on a deluded and false Islamic prospectus. (Many Muslims point to conflicts in the heart of the West, such as the horrors perpetrated in Northern Ireland, and ask whether they make everyone living in Ireland and the UK bloodthirsty extremists). But the now world-wide campaign of terror – the bombing in Tunisia last April involving German tourists, the shooting of a group of French engineers in Karachi last May, the blowing up of Australians in Bali last October – has tempted us to put all Muslims in the same box. The same can be said of the sentencing of a Muslim cleric last month for preaching the murder of Jews and Christians here at home here in Britain ; and of press photographs of the mutilated, scowling, swaggering figure of so-called “Sheikh” Abu Hamza, the Egyptian asylum seeker and benefits-fraudster, in the Finsbury Mosque from which he has quite rightly now been expelled.

In Lent, we need to sweep all this aside. We must distinguish the majority from the minority of Muslims, and attempt to discern the shining obverse of the coin, in one of the world’s three great monotheistic religions.

If Christianity is the largest faith, embracing almost a third of the population of the world, nevertheless the followers of the Prophet Muhammad probably account for one eighth, or 600 million or more souls. They are mostly **not** Arabs. We tend to forget that the Faith is strong in Africa and South and South East Asia ; and that Islam is also well represented in Europe and America by folk who are not temporary residents or displaced persons, but paid up citizens who are as much part of the West as the rest of us. Even in the UK, well over one and a half million are declared Muslims. In France, it is twice that. In Western Europe as a whole, there may be 12 million or more.

As for Islam itself, it shares our scriptures, acknowledges Jesus as a Prophet and affirms the existence of a single, merciful and compassionate Godhead. The Islamic Faith is intrinsically both simple and beautiful. Who could fail to be moved by the Exordium of the Holy Koran which begins with the words :

Praise be to God, Lord of the Creation,

The Compassionate, the Merciful,
King of the Last Judgement!
You alone we worship, and to You alone
We pray for help.
Guide us to the straight path.

Inspired by these scriptures, the Muslim Saint can be an example to humanity. I think of a lady, Rabi'a Al-Adawiyya, who lived near Basra in the 8th Century. She never, in her life on earth, encountered Jesus as *we* know Him. But she did encounter God. Born in a poor home, Rabi'a was stolen as a child, sold as a slave and became a flute player – a night club entertainer, as we would say. But her personal holiness brought her freedom. She was permitted to abandon her career and withdraw to live a life of prayer and celibacy in the desert, as a Sufi or mystic. She taught the pure love of God : that God has to be loved for Himself and not for other reasons. We have some very fine prayers which are attributed to her, like this one :

Lord! The stars shine and men's eyes are closed.
The kings have closed their gates and every lover
Is alone with his beloved. Here I am alone, with You.

One day Rabi'a went into Basra with a jug of water in one hand and a flaming torch in the other. "Where are you going?", someone asked her. "I am going to quench hell and set fire to paradise, so that God may be adored and loved for Himself and not for His rewards". Me, I love Rabi'a. I hope you do, too.

Through the inter-faith dialogue, which is pursued in all the Dioceses of the Church of England, and in many parts of the worldwide church, a serious attempt is being made to establish a "wider ecumenism". This extra-Christian "ecumenism" raises complex theological issues, which I shall address, here in St. Laurence's, on another Sunday. It is not uncontroversial. But I will today say the following.

Despite our differences, we have many things in common with Muslims as well as Jews – not least the fact that we can say "I believe in God", something that differentiates us all from those who think that religious faith is merely some kind of hobby, "for people who 'like that sort of thing'". There are profound religious truths we can see from another angle, and thereby re-learn, through Islam.

To illustrate this, let me turn to my own personal experience. I first encountered Islam in Iran in the 1950s, where I was a language student, freshly arrived from the School of Oriental and Asian Studies in London. Looking back, there were some

lessons. One was the intense feeling in Islam about the power and authority of one God, behind and above the entire creation. After a ritual act of cleansing with water or sand, the Muslim begins his prayers by standing and listening ; then bows towards Mecca to show respect ; then sinks to his knees and prostrates himself – forehead, nose and hands touching the ground – before God. The words “Islam” and “Muslim” in Arabic have the same triliteral consonantal root – S.L.M. The words Islam means submission. A Muslim is one who is submitted. Think of it, when you begin to say in the Creed that you believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. A similar affirmation rises from the minaret into the high blue vault of the Middle Eastern skies – as from the lips of British believers in Bradford or Birmingham, for that matter. The Muezzin’s call to prayer makes the blood curdle with the absoluteness of its imperative. No atheism, no woolly agnosticism, there. The Muslim entirely grasps the fundamental nature of the “Force that is with us” – and which binds the whole of creation together.

The Faith matters, to a Muslim. If, per impossibile, he were in Christian shoes, he would not even begin to understand a society in which, in the name of the Politically Correct and the Far Left, not only hot cross buns, but even Shrove Tuesday pancakes, for school kids were frowned upon, as liable to singularise believers, marginalize others, or otherwise cause offence!

From Islam, therefore, the Christian can learn to deepen his sense of humility in contemplating the Godhead. He can identify with the monotheism of Islam, in the face of the atheism, polytheism and paganism which the Prophet Muhammed so detested. We can gain new insights into the Christian concept of Grace – because, for the Muslim, all good things come from Allah, without whom nothing has abiding content or meaning. A Muslim would therefore agree with the Book of Common Prayer, where it is written that ‘we have no power of ourselves, to help ourselves’. Islamic simplicity, not only of theology but of worship and religious architecture and adornment, would strike a chord with the more austere Christian – Calvinist and Cistercian alike. Islamic sincerity and single-mindedness should encourage us to uphold our own Faith equally.

We can also note that Islam is not only a system of belief, but also a code for living and a force for at least some form of rudimentary social justice. We may not see the position of women as they do, or share their ritual prohibitions such as pork and alcohol. But we can admire their rigour and fasting, their social solidarity, their sense of order, their emphasis on the giving of alms.

Finally, a word about religious mysticism. This phenomenon is essentially one and the same whatever may be the religion professed by the individual mystic : a

constant yearning of the human spirit for personal communion with God. For this reason, from the Muslim Sufi, the Christian can be reminded of the contemplative life, and of the works of such Christian mystics as Lady Julian or St. John of the Cross, or John Bunyan.

But this is not in the least to say that Islam and Christianity are in most respects mutually compatible, let alone much the same. For Muslims, Islam is the apogee. Jesus was a Prophet, but one who has been superseded by Muhammad, the last of the Prophets. The Koran says very specifically that those who refer to Jesus as God are blasphemers. The Koranic verses dealing with Jesus's death are generally taken to mean that Jesus did not die by crucifixion and was not raised from the dead.

The Prophet Muhammad, for his part, was not a miracle worker and he is not worshipped by Muslims. An ordinary man with extraordinary religious sensitivity, in secular life a trader and warrior in Arabia around the year 600, Muhammad received a special revelation which made him in his belief the mouthpiece of God and conferred upon him a special message. The Holy Koran itself is believed to have been dictated to Muhammad by the Archangel Gabriel, as the very word of God, and subsequently committed to the prophet's memory, since by tradition he was illiterate. Strictly speaking, because Arabic was the language used by Allah, the Koran can only be understood in the original, and all translations are suspect. The Westerner in the 21st century will also note that Islam has never known a Reformation or an Enlightenment. Notwithstanding its intellectual brilliance in past centuries, Islam has in modern times resisted scientific and textual criticism of the Koran of the kind to which the Bible has been submitted, with an outcome these days broadly accepted by Catholic and Protestant alike. Islam is furthermore sometimes wrongly interpreted and proclaimed, in primitive "madrassahs" and theological colleges, by self-appointed Mullahs deficient in legal and theological competence, and who some of them even have a poor grasp of Arabic.

Not surprisingly, therefore, despite the admirable efforts of liberal Muslim scholars in the 19th and 20th Centuries, which continues into the 21st, it has proved more difficult for Islam than for Christianity to move with the times and adapt its traditions to the modern world. Precisely because nothing can be added to or subtracted from the Holy Koran, and because the teaching of the Prophet (the Sunna) and the rules and jurisprudence of the faith (Shariah) give the believer not merely his religious beliefs but also map out and rule his entire way of life, Islamic societies have not experienced modernity in the same way as the West, and in the modern world appear to have a problem even with parliamentary democracy.

And then, there is the matter of Muslim intolerance. There are today no Christian churches in Saudi Arabia. In parts of Africa, the Indian subcontinent, Indonesia and the Philippines, church buildings are liable to be torched, their worshippers attacked and even murdered. I myself was once spat upon, in the narrow streets of the Holy city of Meshed, by a Muslim cleric, for being a Christian foreigner. In the Holy city of Qom, I had stones thrown at me for this same reason – something unknown *mutatis mutandis*, in Rome, or Canterbury, or St. Laurence’s Ludlow.

Yet, even here, the Christian should eschew “Holier than thou” attitudes. To some extent, the embarrassment and injuries to which western Christians can be exposed, in Muslim lands, are due to the “time warp” of encounter between the almost post-Christian culture of the Western 21st century with a medieval or primitive culture, little changed from the past. And who should cast the first stone? When we lament the wanton destruction of carvings of the Buddha by the Taliban in Afghanistan, we tend to forget the iconoclasm of the Protestant reformers, smashing images of Christian saints in the 16th and 17th centuries. We tend to forget the religious and intellectual tolerance of Baghdad’s golden age (between AD765 and 1000), and of the Andalusian Caliphate thereafter, when Christians, Jews and Muslims co-existed peacefully and when a brilliant Islam – already the leader in mathematics and astronomy – was open to the world. And if later it turned in on itself and was corrupted and misinterpreted by various adherents for nefarious ends, the same could be said of particular churches and periods in Christian history. When we observe the bitter rivalries of contemporary Islam sects, not least that between the ultra-conservative Al-Qaeda-nourishing Wahabi in Arabia, as opposed to the more flexible Maliki in the Mashreq, do we forget the distance in Christianity which separates Cardinal Ratzinger from Dr. Paisley? The Roman Catholic nun, Lavinia Byrne, was driven, not long ago, from her convent by the Holy Office in Rome, for writing a book in favour of the ordination of women. Only last October, the Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, was summoned before a theological court in Manchester, for having written, in a learned work, something capable of being interpreted as a tiny bit liberal.

Let me now conclude, on a note of Christian orthodoxy, but also of Christian understanding.

Just as not all religions are in agreement, so not all of them can possibly be acceptable to each of us. “Synthesism” and “Relativism” are simply not on. Choice is inescapable. For all Christians, the Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is intended by Him to be universal : it proclaims itself in all ages, to all people, of all races, colours and persuasions. We were reminded of this – not that anyone here needed it – in this morning’s epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians. In Christ, we have been permitted to see God. But Christian commitment does not dispense us from finding time

for openness also. The Divine Being impinges on human kind in many ways and in many guises, fully known only to God. God and His Church are not coterminous. God is also at work outside the Church. To Islam therefore, and its God-fearing followers, in this penitential Christian season, let us address not only our enquiry and our attempt at understanding, but also our respect. And, with the following, we agree :

Allahu akbar. Allahu akbar
Ash-hadu an la Ilah ila Allah.
God is most great ; and there is no god, but God.

Amen.

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