

Observations on Islam by an Anglican clergyman

The Revd Roger B.B. Wild.

The disaster of September 11th caused many people to stop and think. Given some space and time at Crowther Hall in Birmingham in the autumn of 2001 I decided to put down what I knew and had personally experienced of Islam. Ordained in 1965: where had I come in contact with Islam during my life and ministry? What was my knowledge and perception of it as one of the major religions of the world? Memory is selective and perceptions change, as one may see, from decade to decade. This is my perception which is unavoidably subjective, of how Islam came upon us in Britain. Even as I write this for TTC the most recent copy of the Weekly Guardian carries two articles on Islam and Time magazine devotes major space to Islam.

After 11th September (post mortem)

Where were you on September 11th 2001? You may not remember where but you will remember what happened on that day. Tragic event as it was it gave the media as well as the politicians and the military plenty to think about. Nothing will be the same again. History has changed. Had anything changed or was it that change had found a certain focus? What did it mean? What was it saying to our society? America spending \$1 billion dollars per year on intelligence had seemingly been struck a hefty blow by Muslim terrorists armed with razor blades and suicidal cunning. This was a war between materialism and faith, between technology and belief, between one world and another, between naivety and sophistication, between those who had and those who had not.

The 16th of September was my final Sunday in the parish before coming to Crowther Hall and I was to preach and say farewell. Such was the event, its effect upon our society and our own prime minister's determination to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Americans that I had no alternative but to address myself to the situation, neither would I have wished to do otherwise.

Following the event the Archbishop of Canterbury, at a special service, had spoken about darkness in our society and in our midst. John's prologue speaks about humanity preferring darkness to light because their deeds are evil. The scripture readings appointed for the day were pertinent. Rather than dream up my own thoughts; what would the scripture readings of the day have to say. God as William Temple had said, is the God of coincidence. Would there be any coincidence between the event and the daily scriptures?

The passage from Jeremiah stated, "My people are foolish, they do not know me: they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil but do not know how to do good". Luke spoke of the joy of repentance. Folly, stupidity, ignorance, wickedness and repentance were all key subjects. All these themes contained in these passages had something to say to the situation and its unfolding aftermath. The Americans it appeared were more sinned against than sinning and yet these events revealed how they were unable to see how unpopular they were. The book, *Beyond the Gulf War: The Middle East and the New World order*; edited by John Gittings of the Catholic Institute for International Relations states that the Gulf War could have been avoided. In the event, 200,000 Iraqi men were killed with a consequent and accompanying number of widows and orphans in comparison to the loss of 44 American lives. The subsequent loss of life is estimated at half a million people, mainly children.

In *Living Islam* Akbar Ahmed writes with regard to Saddam Hussein, "So intense was the sense of humiliation and anger among Muslims that they would rally behind the devil himself if he stood up to the West. This is not only a disturbing explanation but an uncomfortable reality". Are we now to see this frustration fueled once more?

Whilst at Crowther Hall I took the opportunity to attend a number of seminars on the *Cross and the Crescent* and to read a number of books associated with Islam.

1. First Encounters (*Education*)

At the Woodard school (a member of the largest corporation of Christian public schools in Britain) which I attended there were a number of Muslim boys. Two were Saudi Arabians from wealthy families, one went to

Sandhurst, the other to Los Angeles university. At the time their religion appeared to be no more than absence from the school chapel. When their cousin arrived, he was different. He was allowed into the dormitory to make his ritual ablutions, to take out his prayer mat and to make regular and devout prayers in the direction of Mecca. Another boy, Talik attended school chapel along with everybody else until he realised that his father was a Muslim so this gave him the opportunity to opt out. Another was from an aristocratic Indian family, a fine hockey player but not noticeably religious. These were Muslim boys sent to an overtly Christian school for education in the country of a former colonising power.

It was during those years that I had my first encounter with a Muslim outside the context of school. He was Abbas Khan, from Pakistan, my adoptive father's batman. He was a devout Muslim for whom God was a reality, the creator of the universe and the God of his personal world; someone of whom he was not afraid to speak. God was very real to him in a way that he was probably not real to us. God was part of his conscious existence. Here was another aspect of the legacy of colonialism. A man who had served with the British army was now working in the country that had administered his own.

2. As a Theological Student (*Travel*)

In the sixties as a theological student I had my first encounter with a Muslim in the country of his birth, Israel. He showed me round Jerusalem and was an admirable and enthusiastic companion. What did he think about Jesus? "Oh!", he replied, "I love Muhammed and I love Jesus". Clearly in some ways he saw no difference between the two as he acknowledged them both. Here was something to think about and consider its implications. There in the lands of the three great monotheistic faiths we visited Hebron, the Dome of the Rock and other lesser mosques. In bare feet we enjoyed the coolness, the space and the ornate calligraphy that they offered to the visitor. In the 'rose red city half as old as time' we were offered Coca Cola in the high place from a young and enterprising Muslim boy.

Staying in the Anglican hostel of St George's in Jerusalem we were able to ask questions of the world's leading authorities on the Dead Sea Scrolls, the texts of the Essene Community which had sought refuge in Qumran

by the Dead Sea. We visited the ruins of the Essene community and entered the cave where the scrolls were found by a shepherd boy. We felt the heat, the power, the compulsion of the desert. We were awed by its silence, its size and its mystery. How many of the prophets had gained strength from its interior? From the top of Mount Nebo we were able to see in the distant haze the thin blue strip of the River Jordan and the land of promise beyond. Our taxi drivers were Arab Christians. We had the opportunity to converse with Arab Christians and Muslims and to encounter Muslim and Christian agnosticism. 'There is one God, Allah and Muhammed is his prophet' is a simple no nonsense creed without the complications of persons, properties and substances. In the sixties secularism had brought its own forms of agnosticism for Christian, Jew and Muslim. I remember the Secretary of the Church's Ministry amongst the Jews saying that most Anglican congregations were Jewish in their theology.

From my reading of Arab history the two great assets of the Arabs were their flexible and versatile language and their ability to fight. Both of these had been honed to a high level of excellence in the desert of Arabia. (These two assets could of course be attributed to the English or British) The Arabs were the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsular who came out of their land in the 7th century to conquer the peoples and civilizations around them with both the force of arms and the force of a monotheistic religion. The ancient civilization of Egypt was conquered, the Iranian civilization which was itself the inheritor and conqueror of multiple ancient civilizations was itself overwhelmed by Islam. Bat Ye'or writes, "The general picture that emerges from this 9th to 10th century transitional period in the Middle East evokes that of a Christian Society still wealthy and forming the majority but resigned to a process of decomposition through the surrender of its political future and its security to people who would entirely replace it". Garth Forder states of Muslim perception, "it was clear that the empire in which 'each year they made a new creed' had been punished by God though the Arabs".

3. Post War History (*Immigration*)

In the late 40's following the end of the second world war, the depletion of the British work force and the reluctance of the British people to work

in humid and uncongenial conditions, men and their families were invited from the Indian sub-continent to work in our textile industries. The British were pleased to welcome them to the work force. Many came from rural communities within their own country and were offered wages higher than the High Commissioner in their own country. Not surprisingly they were eager to come to Britain. In much the same way as the people of the Caribbean left the blue skies and sunshine for greater economic security in this country. The first wave of migrants encouraged their families to follow them. This began to challenge the host country with new challenges of thought and behaviour. Many immigrants from the Indian sub-continent were Muslims. Phrases such as multi-racial, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural were being coined and though not new in other contexts they reflected a new experience in British society. A mirror of sorts was being held up to our society. What were we like? Were we racist or not?

4. As a Parish Priest in an Urban Priority Area Parish (*Parish Ministry*)

In the seventies on a council estate in Huddersfield the immigrant workers were Irish and Caribbean. There were few Asians living on the estate and consequently few Muslims. I met one woman married to a Muslim and one black Muslim who asked for baptism for his child. These were the days of protest and reaction. Black was beautiful and Islam was protest. Without being superior I knew more about Islam than he did but as you can imagine it led to an interesting conversation between the appellant and me.

Taking the funeral of a man who had been working in the Persian Gulf I was informed that both his hands had been cut off and that in no way was I to tell his widow. It was assumed that he had been drinking and that he had received draconian Islamic punishment. Occasionally men bound for Saudi Arabia came to ask from me a baptism certificate to show the authorities in Saudi that they were not Jews. Did this mean that the Saudis were taking exception to Jews?

In the town, the Muslim community whose children were beginning to shine in the secondary schools were buying their own properties and not renting council houses. The Asians were displaying family solidarity and helping one another in the purchase of their own properties. It was

reported to me that grandparents of migrating Pakistanis would say to their families as they boarded the plane for England, "Don't let them convert you". And so through various pieces of anecdotal evidence a vague picture began to form. What I had learnt theoretically in theological college about Islam was now taking on an experiential complexion. Islam for me had always been Middle Eastern and North African. Now it had come to our country and our culture, through immigration.

Professor Norman Anderson, one time Dean of Oriental Law in London University and Chairman of the General Synod of the Church of England had spoken of the challenges to Islam from modernity, industrialization and feminism, in a word, westernization. Was this taking place amongst us? Was I witnessing this change in my own country? Later in a North Yorkshire market town, away from industrialization I had the utmost difficulty in finding a Jew, let alone a Muslim.

5. The Influence of the Media (*A lens*)

The deposition of the Shah of Iran and the re-instatement of Ayotollah Khomeini became media headlines and made some realise that there was a difference between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims but just like Northern Ireland or the Balkans few knew what the differences were. It became clear Islam was not as united or as monolithic as was first thought. Various statements following the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and words like *fatwa* and *jihad* sent journalists scuttling for their dictionaries. Conflicts on the Indian and Pakistani borders had their repercussions in Bradford and Bolton. Arab, Israeli, Palestinian, Christian, Muslim and Jew were always in the news in the Middle East. It was all too easy for newscasters to focus on certain areas and to forget others, such as Kashmir and the Sudan. The media it would appear is only able to focus upon one crisis situation at a time. Was the media informed or ignorant, a reflection or a distortion? If only a few understood Christianity; how many would understand Islam?

I recall reading an article in The Independent newspaper by the professor of Islamic Studies at Oxford University countering some of the worst fears about Islam. He defended it as one of the great cultural and civilizing influences of the world. It had, he said, kept alive learning and scholarship when the West was going through a time of barbarism in the

Dark Ages. It was a preserver of the thought of Greece and the developer of mathematics and algebra, the pursuer of trade and architecture. Islam was no longer over there but was here and could not be ignored.

6. Suspicion (*Questions were raised*)

As the world of Islam was brought increasingly to our attention questions were inevitably raised. Who were Muslims? What did they believe? Are they all fundamentalist fanatics? It is easy to fear the unknown, for Islamaphobia to creep in, and easy to imagine the worst. Gloomy predictions about Islamic intolerance and second and third generation immigrant aggression; warnings about their missionary activity and the unthought of building of mosques, all lead to a certain disquiet. What had happened in Britain to allow the number of Muslims to exceed the number of Methodists?

Carlyle Murphy has grouped Islam into four broad groupings: pious Islam, political Islam, cultural Islam and thinking Islam. He has drawn a distinction between Islam and Islamism: one is a religion and the other a utopian political ideology that has moderate, militant and nihilistic strands. There are Sunnis, Shi'ites, Wahhabis and Al Qaeda. What were the differences?

Haddam Wilmer, the recently retired Professor of Theology at Leeds University had said that in thirty years time society will have a revelation of God through Muhammed but will it have a revelation of God through Jesus Christ? Islam is growing through birth and conversion. An implicit challenge was being made by Islam to our own beliefs.

Hans Kung is presently at work on his third volume of a re-interpretation of Christianity for the 21st century. He has written on Judaism and Christianity and is now at work on Islam. He clearly perceives a distinction between the prophet and statesman Muhammed and Jesus the Christ. I remember Bishop Stephen Neil thirty years ago writing of Muslim scholars rewriting the life of Muhammed so that it would appear in a more favourable light when compared to the life of Jesus. If we have two separate and distinct understandings of the revelation of God where does this leave us?

After the explosive demonstration of violence in New York the question of Islamic tolerance was raised. Is Islam a tolerant religion? It

may be that Islam is tolerant but fundamentalism is not. The history of the dhimmi suggests a form of tolerance based upon legislation by dominant Islam over conquered peoples and not an equality of rights before the law. Islam's expansion westwards and along North Africa into Spain was by the sword but Islam's expansion was not always by such means. It entered into India by the Suffis and into South East Asia through trade and grew through conversion and family growth.

Why is it that 70% of the world's refugees are Muslim? This displacement of peoples is bound to bring anger, frustration and bitterness. The Middle East has for long been a running sore.

The USSR entered into Afghanistan to secure its south eastern borders and to show its dominance in a predominantly Muslim region. In order to check this incursion the USA had been supporting the Afghan insurgents and Al Qaeda against the Soviet Union. Statements coming from America following September 11th were indicative of the fact that they knew more about their own interference in Afghanistan and the strategies of terrorism than did the general public. In *The Clash of Civilizations* the author points out, "Muslims make up about one fifth of the world's population but in the 1990s they have been far more involved in intergroup violence than the peoples of any other civilization".

To the questions raised above, about the fear of Islam, its nature, its differing conception of revelation, whether or not it is a tolerant religion and why so many of its people are refugee and illiterate, are there any answers or pointers to answers?

7. Pointers to Understanding and Reconciliation (*Is there a bridge?*)

The questions posed above cannot be answered in a paper like this but questions are a means of discovery and learning.

When Simon Barrington Ward was the General secretary of CMS he wrote of a Muslim theologian who being radical in his thought was ostracized by his peers. He was not conformist and wanted to think in fresh ways. Where was he to go? He found comfort in the Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah. Jewish scriptures which are owned by Muslims and which Christians see fulfilled in the vicarious sufferings of Christ. Religion is of no value if it is not concerned with reality and truth. All

three faiths have deep historic roots in Abrahamic soil which need fresh growth in the spirit of mutual respect and understanding.

Hans Staffer writes in *Dialogue: Stimulating Contacts with Hindus*. "What Ghandi achieved by trying to obtain India's independence through satyagraha was as startling as an earthquake that shook the Christian world out of its complacency. With awe and amazement Christians saw Christ's doctrine put into practice in a way they would never have thought possible". Satyagraha means insisting on the truth. "It does not aim at hurting the opponent it becomes a blessing both for the one who uses it and the one against whom it is used - a willingness to suffer. The willingness requires immeasurably more courage than the readiness to go to war". It is all too easy to put our 'perception' of religion or truth above the pursuit of truth. This concept of insisting on the truth could help Christian, Muslim and Jew to break some of the barriers of hostility and suspicion?

C. S. Song writes, "Many people in Asia, Christians and others are becoming more and more engaged in the mission of encounter with truth in the service of the mission of human community in which the unfittest become the fittest. We want to saturate those who rule with the truth of suffering people. We want to inundate those in high authority with the true state of those in despair. Truth is a big word. It stands there right in front of us. But those blinded by their power cannot see it. ...Truth is such an important fact of life. But those preoccupied with their own self importance built on power and authority hardly appreciate its importance?"

What was that I heard about a moment of truth for the world?! (What is truth? said jesting Pilate. But would not stay for an answer.) Is it not that the true jihad is a struggle for and within the soul and not for territory and when humanity makes it a struggle for land it is the measure of our misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom of God?

James Cutsinger writes: In the case of Christianity and Islam. "It seems that Jesus must be God or not, and that the Quran is either the final and uniquely perfect revelation of God, or not - to mention only two of the more obvious 'contradictions' between these traditions. It is therefore inevitable that Christians and Muslims who limit their approach to the dogmatic letter of their religion will find their perspectives to be mutually exclusive, and their 'dialogue' - if and when they discuss their beliefs at all,

and do not resort instead to conflict and violence - will be reduced to two parallel monologues".

If the mind has not found a way maybe the heart can find a way. al-Hallaj the Muslim mystic and martyr used to say, "Our hearts are a virgin which God's truth alone opens". This notion of *le point verge* was one which Thomas Merton used in his exploration of other faiths. Nouwen too has explored the way of the heart. The idea of the heart is redolent with meaning in the monotheistic faiths. "The heart has reasons that reason knows nothing of". Could it not be said that the present anti war movement is a *crie de coeur*, whilst the drive to war comes from the mind?

In Christianity and Islam; Towards a Civilizational Dialogue the author opines, "Doctrinal controversies are futile and invidious, because there is no way for Christians to question the authenticity of the Islamic revelation which pellucidly exposes a real challenge to Christian doctrines. Thus the emphasis in my opinion, should be on the essence of Jesus Christ's mission, on the civilizational dimension of Christianity, on the essence of the Islamic revelation and on the civilizational dynamism of the Islamic mission".

And again: "For if Christians and Muslims continue to believe intolerantly that one religion must overwhelmingly prevail over the other, peace and justice will be unobtainable. In other words, co-operation between Christians and Muslims should be based on a firm conviction, not merely for the sake of survival. This leads one to say that the platitudes that co-operation should take place because we belong to one humanity should be rejected, partly because there would be no need for struggle against tyrannical powers".

8. A Cock Shy (*hamatolos*)

We started by saying that this was an Anglican's observation on Islam. Islam has five pillars on which it stands: belief, prayer, fasting, alms and pilgrimage. Anglicanism has traditionally stood on three but as it has moved from the insularity of its shores it could be said to have four: scripture, tradition, reason and context. Belief in God is not in question. The Jewish and Christian scriptures have been subjected to the most rigorous and critical analysis for the last two hundred years but are not the weaker for it. Have the Muslim scriptures been subjected to the same

analysis? It would appear that by definition they are not allowed to be so scrutinised. Can Muslims be persuaded to look at the broader issues of revelation? If it is truth that we seek then we cannot assume that we have all of it but we must be constantly in pursuit of it. The pursuit of truth means an openness to the other and lies in the future of a shared compassionate concern.

All religions have their traditions but tradition needs constantly to be examined. It was Cyprian in the third century who said that today's traditions are often no more than yesterday's mistakes. It is so easy to perpetuate mistakes in such a way that they become some kind of sacred truth, fixed and immovable. Much debate over the centuries has taken place between the respective values of reason and revelation. Reason is one of God's gifts to man and whereas it needs the spirit to discern the Spirit of God, reason is given that we may make sense of that revelation. Contextualisation takes us back to the heart of the matter. In what way did and in what way does God contextualise himself in human history?

9. Epilogue (*reconciliation*)

The historic enemies of true religion and virtue have always been ignorance, doubt, fear, superstition and prejudice. These can be found in every culture. "Ben Laden, Dead or Alive, Let's go get 'em" is the language of the gut and not reason, of revenge and not reconciliation. Afghanistan has only known revenge and not reconciliation. Can a genuine reconciliation be brought about in Afghanistan? The global town has now become the global village in which we all live and the challenge for its inhabitants is to live in peace with one another. Can bridges of understanding be built?

Lila Abu-Lughod in her book about the Bedouin Arab, *Veiled Sentiments* says, "The value of self control, or the possession of 'agl', is especially apparent in the political realm. The most respected men in the Western Desert are those called upon to mediate disputes. The person who does not anger easily, who is even-tempered and patient, dispassionate and fair, is asked for in tribal hearings. Mediators are usually drawn from the ranks of the leaders ... Reason and age are embedded in this title".

It is this quality of mature understanding and tolerance that needs to be embodied in all religions. Does this not bear the qualities of the meekness which will inherit the earth? We need to focus upon what is most human if we are to survive.

One Anglican priest I know is helping the imam in Bosnia rebuild his mosque destroyed in the conflict. The imam has a doctorate from Harvard and calls his Anglican friend, 'Excellency'. Is there not hope in this situation? Here is reconciliation, here is forgiveness, restitution and reconstruction. A bridge is being built between two communities of different but similar faiths. Muslims are not aliens but cousins.

George Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, gave a paper to St George's Windsor on the subject of the Anglican Communion: Bridge or Cul de Sac? A bridge is a means of crossing from one place to another. A cul de sac is a dead end. When we do not create bridges we come to a dead end. One of the sayings of Jesus contained in Muslim literature is, "The world is a bridge to heaven"... if not, to hell.

10. Postscript (*to set the hares running*)

The above comes from my own western limited experience and reading. They raise more questions than answers can be given. For me, they point to many areas of exploration and enquiry, and I would value direction as to the priority of pursuit.

History depends on who is telling the story. Alexander may have been 'great' to the Greeks but the Persians perceived him quite differently. Islam, like Christianity, is not a monolithic faith and needs to be approached in its different forms and contexts. In certain respects it would appear to have seen the flaws in atheistic communism and materialistic humanism more clearly than the western Christian world. It has a sense of the Almightyness of God that we may have reduced to His almateyness. Carl Yung spoke of 'man's God almighty'. How we worship God is of tremendous importance. When we lose the sense of awe we lose the sense of God. Music, I believe, is the most spiritual of the art forms but to my knowledge the Muslims do not use it in their worship. Is it perceived as being too sensual?

Spengler in his *Decline of Western Civilization* written in the second decade of the 20th century saw the re-emergence of fundamentalist religion

at the end of the century, when as he put it, he saw humanity's coming loss of a romantic fascination with science and technology. We are experiencing that resurgence today.

Professor Demant, late professor of Ethics at Oxford University has said that Christianity's greatest contribution to humanity is that it has clipped the pride of man. Humility was a despised virtue in the ancient world, so often perceived as weakness and yet it is just in this area where there can be a true meeting. This takes us to the incarnation which Muslims anathematise and which Christians affirm. The self emptying of God expressed in Philippians Chapter 2, mysterious and mind blowing as it may be makes sense in the struggle for faith in a God of compassion. To quote P.T. Forsyth, "Incarnation is not impossible to the Infinite; it is necessary. If he could not become incarnate His infinitude would be partial and limited. It would not be complete. It would be limited to all that is outside human nature. It would be limited by human nature in the sense of not being able to enter it, of being stopped at its gate. ... Self limitation is one of the infinite powers of Godhead... If the Incarnation is not possible, then theism is not." And again, "The power of His Incarnation has become so weak among men, for one reason because its explanation has been sought at the wrong end of life. The wonder has been transferred from Good Friday to Christmas". This I imagine takes us to the heart of the matter, was the incarnation, real or imagined?

I would add two further points.

There are two universally valid sacraments or symbols, birth and death, to which the sacraments of the gospel address themselves. Is there any correspondence to this in Islam?

Central to the Christian faith is the concept of love. God is love. This is a relational term and yet for Islam the notion of relation, association or shirk is the greatest of sins. The way of humility, the way of love, the way of *le point verge*, the way of the fresh start, the way of Abraham as the friend of God who was in relationship with God may bear the seeds of a new way, which we will discover was always the old way of encounter and respect.

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