

COMMENTS on some RECENT TRENDS IN THE Muslim World

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1. The complexity of fundamentalism

Maha Azzam in a recent article¹ has raised the question as to whether in rejecting a monolithic view of Islam analysts have gone to the other extreme by substituting a set of rigid and compartmentalised notions. *"It appears that the perceptions and practice of Islam are much more fluid and tend to overlap, and that there is a common and integrated world-view amongst Muslims that can be delineated."* Some have perhaps come to think of Muslims in terms of fundamentalism and terrorism, and nationalism and Holy War or *jihad*. Fundamentalism is not always about terrorism: more often it is about going back to the fundamentals. While *jihad* is not always about warfare, more often it is about striving in the way of God with the sword undrawn. Even the militant Muslim fundamentalist may feel on the defensive and be reacting to the modern scene at one extreme, while Salman Rushdie, as a post-modernist novelist, is reacting to the other extreme. They are both Muslims engaging with the secular, pluralistic, disintegrating Western world and seeking answers. A New Testament fundamentalist (Acts 9: 1-30) and a modern terrorist.

2. Post-modernity – a challenge for both Muslims and Christians

The post-modern relativistic 'religion of tolerance' is as much a challenge for Muslims as for Christians. Professor Akbar S Ahmad dedicates his fascinating book *Postmodernism and Islam: Predicament and Promise*² to his two year old daughter, Nafees. He concludes his preface thus: *"Nafees will live, as a Muslim, in the post-modern world which is just beginning to shape our lives; therein lies the Muslim predicament, that of living by Islam in an age which is increasingly secular, cynical, irrelevant, fragmented, materialistic and, therefore, for a Muslim often hostile. In an age of cynicism and disintegration Islam has much to offer. I therefore pray she finds inspiration in her faith and culture, to assist her in making sense of, and resolving, the predicament of living as a good, caring, and decent human being in the postmodernist world."*

The professor speaks as a Muslim for whom Islam covers every aspect of life. For the Christian as well, belief should cover every aspect of life. Truth and morality are not relative but absolute. From a Biblical perspective I see no need for competition, estrangement or hostility between Muslims and Christians, or between Muslims and Christians and those of other convictions. I believe in the uniqueness of the revelation of God in Christ, but I always want to share this faith in love and humility. A friend of mine, Rev Canon John Meadowcroft, recently wrote³ *"Being in the academic milieu again is making us aware of some of the trends towards "post-modernism" in the prevailing intellectual climate of the West today. We are moving from the rationalism and materialism that has prevailed for a hundred years, to a kind of unreason where there is no absolute truth or ethical standards. People do not believe nothing – they will believe anything that seems to offer to fill the spiritual void. The post-modern mind is marked by its gullibility. It is a new paganism. I believe that the challenge to the church in the future is to offer a rational spirituality – a faith in God that is based on objective reality, one which has its emotional expression, but in which subjective feelings are not uppermost. This is why I am excited about the theological enterprise into which God has led me."*

¹ Islamist Attitudes to the Current World Order ICMR Vol 4, No 2, Dec 1993, p247

² Routledge, London and New York, 1992

³ Extract from a circular letter to friends dated 21st December 1995, New Zealand

3. Increasing persecution of Christians

Persecution of Christians has been, and is increasingly, a stern reality in the twentieth century. More believers have been martyred for their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour in this century than in all the previous nineteen centuries combined. Much of this persecution has taken place under Islamic rule. Generally, Muslims have perceived religious freedom as freedom to become Muslim, not as freedom to leave Islam. It is difficult for them to conceive of anyone wanting to leave the Household of Islam. So it is that Muslims who have sought to confess faith in Jesus as Lord have faced persecution and sometimes death. Let us look at Sudan for an example. The United Nations reported that the militant Islamic government of Sudan has declared a systematic campaign against Christians. At least 300,000 Sudanese Christians have been killed since 1982. Sudanese Christian leaders urged believers around the world to pray – *“We need your prayer support so that we might be able to love those who cause our suffering and show them that the love of Christ is a stronger weapon than those used against us.”*

We do indeed need to pray for the church in the Islamic world (primarily in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Africa and Central Asia), that the laws of apostasy which forbid the renunciation of Islam will be abolished and that new converts can give testimony to their faith without fear of repercussions.

4. Closer relationships between Christians and Muslims.

The visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr George Carey, to the Al-Azhar University in Cairo on 4th October 1995 was widely reported in both the Egyptian and British press. It was remarkable that the Archbishop of Canterbury was asked to give a lecture at the Al-Azhar University. The full text is published in the journal of the CSIC (Islamic and Christian Muslim Relations), Vol 7, No 1, 1996, pp 95-101.

Dr Carey listed some attitude-transforming statements:

- Friendship not hostility
- Understanding not ignorance
- Reciprocity not exclusivism
- Co-operation not confrontation

In speaking about cooperation he noted that Muslims and Christians share in a common witness against secularism as a system that defines life, knowledge and culture without any reference to what lies beyond this life. He advocated cooperation in fighting poverty and human misery, and in promoting peace and harmony among peoples with tolerance and understanding.

5. The harvest to come

The revealing of Christ to the Gentiles was unexpected, far more widespread and extensive than anyone foresaw. It was mind-boggling and changed the face of the Hebrew church. The difficulties in accepting it and the contextualization called for resulted in the Council of Jerusalem. God’s preparation for the coming in of Gentiles involved elements which can be paralleled today:

1. The Intertestament Jewish Dispersion – compare with modern dispersions
2. The Greek language – compare this facility with modern mass communications
3. Sovereign acts of God eg hunger for the Word of God, visions and dreams
4. Opposition and persecutions Acts 13: 44-52