

Old Faith ... New Face

Vivienne Stacey

When Christ was on earth he spoke in the context of Palestine during the imperialist Roman occupation of the first century AD. We may not know how He would have spoken to students. But we must consider how He might speak to the student world in this last quarter of the 20th century with special reference to the Muslim student.

Only the minority of Muslim students studies abroad, but they are for various reasons extremely strategic. The Muslim student in a foreign university or college is aware of his need of friendship and concern for his welfare whether this is shown by Christians, Communists, or any other group or person. I know of one national believer in a country where there is no visible church. He is praying that ten of his fellow countrymen who are studying abroad will find Christ and return as His disciples. God can use friendly Christians to answer this prayer. The Muslim student abroad is more open, less on the defensive and keener to understand new ideas and situations than he would be in his home country.

There is no typical Muslim student. We must ask, To which country does he belong? To which social stratum? Is he a Sunni? A Shia? Is he a member of some Shia sub-sect or some other group? Is he a practising Muslim or only a nominal one? Many national, cultural, social and religious influences have affected his development. Let us, however, divide Muslim students, wherever they study, at home or abroad, into 'religious' students and 'secular' students. I have met Muslim students who do not believe in God but who would still claim to be Muslims in a cultural and national sense. In a way these Muslim atheists or agnostics are 'religious' rather than 'secular' for they are concerned with religion while rejecting the religious ideas of their father's faith.

But let us look at the truly 'secular' Muslim. He is the person who says that belief is entirely a personal matter governing one's private life. But such a concept is not properly Islamic and reflects 'secularisation' in Islam.

One of the most interesting examples of the 'secularising' trend in Islam is to be found in Algeria. The new Algerian Constitution of 1976 declares Islam to be the religion of the state. The cultural revolution has as one of its particular objectives 'to adopt a lifestyle in harmony with Islamic morals and the principles of the socialist Revolution, as defined by the national Charter'. The presidential oath includes the promise 'to respect and glorify the Islamic religion'. The French, however, ruled Algeria for well over a century and the present government obviously recognises the influence of French culture and literature. European secular thought may be a more powerful influence on students than Islamic philosophy and literature. Yet the new educational reforms put a greater stress on Arabic, Arabisation and Islam. The question is, From where does the modern Algerian student draw his inspiration? Does he look to the Al Azhar and the Qur'an or to Paris and modern European philosophy? It is interesting that two modern Algerian women writers who were selected to the Algerian Assembly write in French, not Arabic. In approaching

Algerian students the Christian may need to be more familiar with Jean~Paul Sartre and Albert Camus than with AI-Ghazali.

One approach to the 'secular' or 'religious' Muslim students is through his own indigenous literature. Let me take one example from Pakistan \and another from Egypt.

Most Pakistanis hold Dr. Muhammad Iqbal, the poet-philosopher, in high regard although he died in 1938, well before the creation of Pakistan. In Islam and beyond he is a world figure who did much to show the relevance of Islam to modern life. Iqbal studied in Munich and was greatly influenced by some German philosophers. His one English work is 'Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam'. Otherwise his thought and influence are embodied in his great poetical works in Urdu and Persian. To approach Pakistanis, and especially students, without some first~hand knowledge of Iqbal and his poetry is like living in Germany with no knowledge of Goethe or evangelising in England with no familiarity with Shakespeare.

The 'secular' student can be reached through Iqbal because he is such a great Muslim poet and philosopher. The 'religious' student can be reached through him for the same reason as well as for his religious thought. The Westerner who appreciates Iqbal has started to think in Eastern terms.

One Arab writer noted that Iqbal's poetry has five creative elements:

- 1) His firm faith
- 2) The Qur'an
- 3) His love of 'morning devotions'
- 4) His philosophy of 'self'
- 5) The influence of the poetry of Maulana Rumi, the famous Persian poet.

Iqbal's philosophy of 'self' can lead one into discussion on the nature of man. His frequent references to prayer and 'morning devotions' appeal to many Easterners even if they themselves are not so faithful as Iqbal in their practice. In a collection of poems called 'Bal~e-Jibrael' ('The Wings of Gabriel') Iqbal writes: "Whether it be Attar, or Rumi, or Razi, or Ghazzali, they cannot achieve anything without the early morning devotions." "Even in the sword-sharp cold wind of London, I never gave up my respected custom of early morning devotions." There are many other such references which remind one that the Bible is full of similar references to prayer in the early morning – Gn. 19:27; Ex. 24:4, 34:4; 1 Sam. 1:19, Mk 1:35, Lk. 4:42. The subject of Iqbal and prayer can be a fruitful point of contact with the religious Muslim who reads Urdu or Persian or both.

With the 'secular' Muslim, Iqbal's poetry and Rumi's poetry would also be a profitable line to pursue. In 'Bal-e-Jibrael'. Poem 3. Iqbal wrote: "Your cure lies in the fiery but sad poetry of Rumj. (Your) disease is that you suffer from the magic of the Western thought which has succeeded in dominating your thinking." Rumi, like several other Sufi poets, makes significant references to Christ. I remember once at the Baghdad airport having a conversation with a Pakistani student who had been studying in Munich. He was carrying as the most evident piece of his hand luggage a

large piece of wood wrapped in cloth. On the wood Sadiqain, Pakistan's leading artist, had painted a verse of the Qur'an. He proudly showed me and an Iraqi actress this treasure which was something from his culture as well as from his religion. I had been reading a history of Christians in Iran and was able to show him a quotation from Rumi about Christ. He was probably a 'religious' Muslim and the actress was probably 'secular', but Rumi proved to be a contact point with both. I have laboured this point as we seldom take time to try to immerse ourselves in other people's heritages. For this we are the poorer, and so is our witness. We do well to remember St Paul, who could quote the Greek poets (Acts 17:28) and the Cretan prophets (Titus 1:12).

My second example of the use of indigenous literature in the approach to Muslim students is from Egypt's leading playwright of today. Tewfil Al-Hakim's Arabic plays are read throughout the Arab world and some are available in translation. (Heinemann have published a collection of four). The earliest one, 'The Song of Death', "has as its central theme the conflict between traditional vengeance and freedom through education from such deadening and destructive prejudice." The play describes the dilemma facing a student from Cairo returning to his home village. For those who do not read Arabic, Heinemann have published 'Modern Arabic Short Stories' (selected and translated by Denys Johnson-Davies, 1976), a selection by contemporary authors from several Arab lands including Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. "They represent an interesting phase in the overall continuing resurgence of Arabic literature ... and give some indication of the way Arab men and women view the modern world."

Still another bridge in communication with all types of Muslim students is a study and use of proverbs. There is time to give only one example. In Urdu and Panjabi a well-known proverb is, "One fish makes the whole pond dirty." (See the story of Achan in Joshua 7.) Or speaking of the choice of priorities and the pearl of great price (Mt 13:45), one can quote the Urdu and Panjabi proverb. "If it is expensive you weep once; if it is cheaper you weep many times." Here is a whole field for us to explore. Maybe we should also pay more attention to the Bible's book of Proverbs.

Last, but not least in importance we should consider our use of religious vocabulary in discussions with Muslim students. On a plane from Delhi to a Central Asian city I was reading an English book called 'The Islamic Tradition' by John B. Christopher (Harper and Row, 1972) and making notes in Urdu. The student next to me was fascinated. Realising that I was intriguing her, I greeted her. She expressed her surprise that I was writing in Persian. I explained that I was really writing Urdu but that the word 'salvation' was written the same in Urdu and Persian. I refrained from explaining 'salvation' and prayed that she would enquire further if she was genuinely wanting to understand.

After lunch she again asked what in the world I was doing. I explained that I had noted the words 'sin', 'repentance' and 'salvation' in Urdu and I was studying their use in Islam and Christianity as although the same words were used the meanings were not the same. I explained the different concepts for the same words and asked if she had read the Bible, for she had told me that she was studying English literature. Apparently she had a Bible in English but had found it difficult to understand, so I suggested she start with Genesis and Matthew. She eagerly accepted my offer of a brief outline of the message of the

Bible. I wrote this for her and she gratefully put it into her handbag before we parted. Meaningful dialogue with students must take into account this usage of the same religious terms but with different connotations and meaning.

To win Muslim students for Christ we need three things:

- 1) A burden of prayer like St Paul's - "My heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved " (Rom 10:1-3: see also Rom 9:1-3).
- 2) Knowledge of Islam and Islamic literature as well as a knowledge of our own faith and theology.
- 3) An ability to communicate in meaningful terms, appreciating that words like 'sin', 'repentance' and 'salvation' have very different meanings for the Muslim and that concepts of the nature of man, the unity of God and prophethood are also very different in parts.

Prayer is a matter of the heart; knowledge, of the mind. Communication relates to the communing of man to man, a matter of the soul or spirit. To share the gospel is to share Christ and to share ourselves. What we are will come over - and also what we are not and yet should be.

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