

Muslims and Evangelism

By DICK WOOTTON

IN the autumn of 1966 many readers of the church papers received a jolt when they read that a high level international Christian conference had decided that 'the churches must give up completely the idea of conversion' in their approach to the Muslim immigrant in Britain. This point was singled out as the most important finding in the official press release of the conference. It was the sixth meeting of the Churches' Committee on Migrant Workers in Western Europe, which comes under the Division of Inter-Church Aid, Refugees and World Service of the World Council of Churches. All the main countries of Western Europe, nine in number, were represented, together with Greece, the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the Roman Catholic Committee on Inter-European Migration. The chairman was Edwin Barker, Secretary of the Council for Social Responsibility of the Church Assembly. One day's discussion out of five was concerned with Muslims in Britain, and for this Dr. Kenneth Cragg and the Rev. David Brewster were specially invited, but they had no share in shaping the press release which embodied the conference's findings.

Some time was spent at the conference in studying the report of a survey about the churches and the Muslim community in Bradford, undertaken by Eric Butterworth of Leeds University. The declaration against evangelism was followed by this: 'This may be unacceptable to those who assume both the superiority of Christians and that non-Christians have nothing of value to contribute. It may be mistakenly taken to mean that all faiths are equal.' What a distorted picture of evangelism! One wonders that the Church Assembly's Committee on Evangelism did not at once correct it. The true evangelist has no illusions about the superiority of Christians—he knows that 'evangelism is simply one beggar telling another where he can find food'; he is quite prepared to admit that non-Christians have 'something of value to contribute', but he still takes seriously our Lord's repeated command to evangelise. Further it is hard to see how the refusal to evangelise can be defended unless all faiths are equal. If Christianity has something which other faiths do not possess, what right have Christians to withhold it from their adherents? If it be urged that we can share what we have found in Christ with people of other faiths without seeking to convert them, the answer surely is that allegiance to Christ cannot be combined with allegiance to other lords or other prophets—in the Biblical view it is all or nothing.

This attack on evangelism aroused comparatively little reaction in the church papers. Their correspondence columns the following week carried no reference to it. A week later there were two letters in the *Church Times*, one from a former missionary, Canon R. Iliff, expressing surprise at the lack of reaction to the declaration, recognising the harm done by 'arrogant and aggressive attempts at conversion' and concluding,

'Muslims are our brothers, and in love we must endeavour to show them God's love in Christ, that they may yield to him. Perish the day when the Church must "give up completely the idea of conversion", as this Committee has asserted.' The other writer was John B. Taylor, Reader in Islamics at Selly Oak Colleges, who urged the value of 'sensitive dialogue and mutual service', but also cautioned against 'giving the impression that one has shelved the vital concerns' of mission and conversion. A letter in the *Church of England Newspaper* that week pointed out that it was not merely *direct* evangelism or seeking *immediate* conversions that was deplored, but the whole endeavour of evangelism with a view to conversion—and what evangelism can there be without this objective? The writer went on to argue for both loving service and sensitive evangelism. In the same week the *Church Times* carried a full article by Dr. Max Warren on the subject, describing the reference to conversion as 'muddle-headed, tententious and otiose'. He goes on to outline some of the social problems confronting the immigrant community and to urge that only after facing these sincerely will the Church be in a position to consider the question of evangelism.

Inquiries from the Board of Social Responsibility revealed that all the members of the committee had concurred in the statement about conversion, but no further explanation was forthcoming. The suggestion that a distinction could be drawn between true evangelism and 'proselytising' and that a statement along those lines might be issued was rejected.

For further explanation the public has had to wait a year for the publication of Butterworth's survey under the title of 'A Muslim Community in Britain' (CIO, 60 pp., price 3s. 6d.) This begins with a foreword by the chairman of the Committee on Migrant Workers commending the report for study but disclaiming any responsibility for its conclusions. The report itself is mainly a factual study of the situation in Bradford, with a Pakistani community of some 20,000 in a total population of 298,000, to which 800 children were born in 1966 out of a total of 6,000. Their educational and social circumstances, their employment and living conditions, their health and the attitude to them of their neighbours are all expounded. Then follows a study of the local churches and their leaders, and then without any argument or preparation we are presented with this paragraph:

'It is difficult to see any future in migrant areas, at this stage, for ministers who emphasise evangelising traditions and give high priority to the conversion of Muslims. To make any impact on a Muslim community which is gaining in power and which is to some extent conscious of its growing strength, it would seem necessary to give up completely the idea of mass conversion, which in any event takes attention away from the most important social factors of the situation. In a sense the desire for mass conversion, like the desire for the world to be less evil, can be seen as a rejection of schemes of relatively short-term action which have any hope of success.'

Startling as this is when introduced in this way, it is worth noting that it does not go so far as the committee's report, for it deprecates not the idea of conversion *per se* but the idea of mass conversion, which

is very questionable in itself and has never been the aim of the Christian evangelist among Muslims. But from other passages it would seem that the author is against any kind of conversion in connection with the Muslim in Britain. The reasons for this must be sought in the following pages (28-30). This is what they add up to:

(1) 'In a detribalised setting in Africa it (conversion) may have inestimable value, but with a cohesive group such as the Muslims, whose religion appears to inform much more of their lives than is true of Christians, it is not practicable'—i.e., the conversion of a Muslim is very difficult. This no one disputes, but is there anything that is really worth while which is not difficult? Here is no argument.

(2) 'The resources required to convert Muslims to Christianity in this situation would thus be out of all proportion to the success to be achieved.' This seems to be basically the same argument in a different guise. But surely the sociologist is going outside his field in trying to estimate how much effort and expense would be worth while to secure conversions. From the Christian viewpoint some have felt their lives well spent in winning one person to Christ, and what other standpoint can be valid in such a matter?

(3) 'Only those who are marginal to the society, if it be a Muslim one, can expect to be converted.' (Later he explains the 'marginal' people as 'those who drink, etc',—the last word presumably covering neglect of religious ordinances and irregular sexual unions). How any Muslim however 'marginal' can 'expect to be converted', I cannot see; probably the meaning is 'be expected'. Having apparently implied that such people are most likely to be converted, the author goes on to say, 'Such people are not amenable to the claims of Christianity and have been taught to regard it with suspicion', and then switches over to another subject. Whatever his meaning, one is reminded of the fact that it was just the 'marginals', the prostitutes, tax-collectors and 'sinners', who were attracted to Christ and entered the Kingdom before the devout.

The report deals next with attitudes to immigrants, to immigration and to the Church's responsibility to those outside on the part of various denominations and groups of people. In the following section there is an appraisal of what the churches have already done: what is said of one committee sums up the whole—'it has few resources and has taken few initiatives'. Some impressions are given of Muslim attitudes to Christianity, mainly hostile and mainly expressed by educated Muslims. Some of these are probably inspired by fear of such integration with the majority community as would loosen religious and social loyalties, and may perhaps be fostered by Muslim religious leaders for this reason. There seems to be a widespread idea that Christian service (whether here or in Pakistan) is entirely actuated by the desire for conversions.

The last section of the report contains Butterworth's recommendations. He urges the education of ministers, officials and other leaders of opinion in the social problems of the migrant areas and in the problem of race relations. Ministers should take a firm stand for social justice and against racial prejudice when it finds expression for example in the press. Efforts should be made to include Muslims in

organisations such as youth clubs. Other proposals include neighbourhood projects associating the people of a particular area regardless of race in improving its amenities, pre-school play groups to help Muslim mothers and to introduce the children to English, multi-racial housing associations and the calling out of voluntary effort in community service from the young people of the city. All these seem splendid ideas as far as they go, and one hopes that the Christians of Bradford and similar cities will give them effective support.

But to return to our main theme—what really lies behind this attack on evangelism? Is it just a recurrence of 'the old East India Company's fears of chaplains causing trouble if they interfered with the natives', as someone has suggested? Hardly, when the situation is so different; and yet the possibility of official pressure is seen in a letter I received from a friend who is a Liaison Officer for immigrants, urging me not to support the visit of a Pakistani evangelist to this country. Is it just a symptom of the churches' loss of nerve in an era when complete scepticism about the basic truths of the faith is tolerated and almost fashionable in church leaders? That may be part of the explanation, but it is not the whole story. We must look deeper than this.

The explanation lies both in the sad history of Muslim-Christian relations and in the particular situation of the immigrants. When the average Muslim thinks of Christianity he remembers the Crusades, those bitter wars of aggression waged often with barbarous cruelty and treachery by the 'Christian' powers of Europe against one of the 'heart-lands' of Islam. The subjugation of many Muslim countries by the British, French and Italians in the last hundred years (though now happily ended) and the establishment of Israel with British and American support is to him proof of the same bitter antagonism. The religious question cannot be separated from these political overtones. Further, even if he is not himself devout, the immigrant feels obliged to defend his cultural heritage against what he sees as the corrupting influence of the society around him, especially in matters of family life and sex relations. He finds himself among people who have many misconceptions about Islam, no appreciation of its values and no religion of their own. This makes him most sensitive to any approach from outside, especially if it seems to threaten his religion. Whether the Bradford Muslims have been the objects of aggressive evangelism (in the bad sense) from people lacking in sensitivity and understanding, I cannot say, but it is possible.

The sociologists are rightly aware of this situation, and the solution they propose may be from a purely sociological angle a sound one; but it is not one which Christians in loyalty to Christ can accept. To do so would be to express no confidence in the work of many devoted missionaries who have gone from this country to Muslim lands and to cause distress and perplexity in the minds of many splendid men and women who at great personal cost have left the House of Islam to seek a new life at the feet of Jesus Christ; I have known personally dozens of such people, two of whom gave their lives for their faith. But more important still it would be direct disobedience to the command of our Saviour himself.

A kind of middle way is suggested by Dr. Cragg in an appendix to

'A Muslim Community in Britain'. He brings the religious issue to the fore by appealing to the Old Testament teaching about sympathy to the stranger (Ex. 23: 9, etc.). He expounds the positions of the 'good neighbours' and of the evangelisers clearly, and speaks of the 'conviction that what preaching and conversion intend is in the deepest interest of all men as only the Gospel knows how to diagnose and satisfy their souls, and it is not ours to withhold, or discriminate in, the trust of salvation'. He then goes on to outline a third kind of approach, that of 'magnanimity and a large sympathy, refusing to take Islam as wholly antithetical to Christianity, and being alive to the several senses in which Muslim faith as to God, creation, law, mercy and eternity provides a living field of doctrinal and spiritual relationship for a Christian ministry of word and action'. Here in fact is the plea for 'dialogue' (though the term itself is not used), which Dr. Cragg has made persuasively in *The Call of the Minaret* and other writings, and which Dr. Warren has ably supported, as when he wrote:

'It is to believe that in ways beyond our seeing, the Lord Christ has been preparing a people for himself in the world of Islam, and that he wants his disciples who are identified with his Body to go to meet them, so that with them, together with him, all may find themselves in the Household of God.'

What are evangelical Christians to say about this view? Here a personal experience may be of interest. My reaction when I first came across it as a missionary in Pakistan was to reject it as an implied denial of the uniqueness of Christ. When later I heard Dr. Cragg speak about it, I had second thoughts. I came to realise that much of my antipathy to Islam was not zeal for Christ but a merely human reaction, a failure to have the same kind of love for the devout Muslim that I had (however feebly) for the irreligious person. When God showed me this, I was able to approach Islam with a new respect and to find in it spiritual depths of which I had not dreamt. Then I began to look on the Muslim with a new understanding, sympathy and appreciation: but it did not make me any the less an evangelist.

I accept then the validity of 'dialogue', though not always the language in which it is commended, and those who engage in it have my prayers for God's blessing. But dialogue requires a profound understanding of Islam in its Christian participant. Not every Christian who is in touch with Muslims has such understanding. Others who are so equipped may not feel that dialogue, valuable as it is, fully meets Christ's command to evangelise as they see it addressed to them personally. Let such people prepare themselves by prayer and by a sympathetic study of the immigrants' situation and outlook; then let them go ahead with hearts on fire with love for Christ and for those to whom they go, undeterred by conferences and press releases, and with a humble spirit and a deep respect for Muslims' faith seek to present to them our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ in all the fulness of his love and power. As Dr. Warren wrote in the article already referred to: ' . . . the Church must, in patience and humility, continue to witness to Christ and to introduce people to him. God forbid that the Church should ever say that it has given up completely the idea of converting—anyone.'