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Churchman

EDITORIAL

Peace Where There Is No Peace

It all seemed so easy. Following the attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001, the United States and its NATO allies had to retaliate and eradicate the threat posed by their terrorist enemies, but as the latter were poorly armed, they would be no match for the most sophisticated forces in the world. It was generally thought that the enemy was holed up in Afghanistan as the ‘guest’ of the radical Islamic régime that had taken over the country in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal a few years earlier. Fortunately, the Taliban, as these Islamists were called, were sufficiently barbaric as to attract almost universal condemnation, both within and without the Muslim world. Thus, despite the fact that Afghanistan had been the graveyard of both British and Russian imperialism, the Americans optimistically believed that a *blitzkrieg* could take the country in a matter of weeks and that a grateful population would then rush to embrace Western-style freedom and democracy. And so it seemed—for a while. The Taliban were duly dislodged, some form of ‘democracy’ was introduced, and personal freedoms, especially for women, could at least be discussed, even if they were not fully implemented. Mission accomplished—or was it? Now, more than a decade later, Western troops are still in the country, resistance to the prescribed form of ‘modernisation’ is rife (not least among Afghan army recruits, some of whom have turned on their ‘liberators’ to lethal effect) and the democrats in Kabul live in fear of their lives. The foreign armies are continually threatening (or promising) to pull out, but everyone knows that if they do, the system they imposed will collapse and the barbarity it was supposed to replace will probably return—no doubt with a vengeance.

Yet, having learned nothing from this experience, the Americans did not hesitate two years later to invade Iraq, with a similar agenda in view. Their thinking was that if the evil régime of Saddam Hussein could be overthrown, Iraq could be set on the standard Western path of freedom and another source of instability in the region would be taken care of. Nobody seemed to realise that the country had been ruled for centuries by

Sunni Muslims (supposedly the most moderate branch of Islam) but that they were a minority in the country that was carved out of the Ottoman Empire in 1921. A one-man, one-vote democracy in Iraq would hand power over to the more radical Shiites, as well as raise the intractable problem of the Kurds, a largely Sunni but non-Arab minority that wanted independence from Baghdad. As we all know, Saddam Hussein was soon removed in another *blitzkrieg*-style operation and the underlying fissures of Iraqi society were duly exposed. The Kurds got a form of autonomy, but this only disquieted Turkey and Iran, both of which had large and unhappy Kurdish minorities that wanted the same treatment, and so threatened the unity of those neighbouring countries. The displaced Arab Sunnis, meanwhile, were not going to take defeat by democracy lying down, and in this they were supported by the Sunni majority in the rest of the Arab world.

Fast forward a few years and we come to the 'Arab Spring,' a series of revolts against dictatorial régimes that began in Tunisia and spread eastwards. Before long, Lybia and Egypt had both succumbed, and everyone expected Syria to be the next falling domino. Once again, the promise of freedom and democracy was in the air, this time without overt Western backing, which might have guaranteed that these imported ideas would be genuinely popular. Tunisia, with its strong French connections, managed to pull it off, but Libya fell apart and Egypt turned into a Muslim theocracy, democratically elected to suppress non-Islamic influences in the country, including its ancient Coptic church and other Christians.

When this happened, outsiders became aware, virtually for the first time, that the Middle East was not totally Islamic. Of course, some people had always known that Lebanon was a half-Christian country, in which the position of all the main religious groups was constitutionally protected by a sharing out of the main offices of state, but after a generation of warfare there, involving Palestinians and Israelis who fought their proxy battles in the streets of Beirut, Lebanon had been reduced to a shambles and there was a mass exodus of refugees, most of them Christians. As a result, an erstwhile Christian country became largely Muslim, making it even harder to govern since its religiously balanced constitution no longer reflected the population as a whole.

Lebanon is a small country though, and its Christians had a long history of emigration, so their departure was scarcely noticed. Egypt was different. There more than ten percent of the population was officially Christian, but although Christians were more prone to leave than others were, there was no mass exodus that threatened the existence of the

community. Instead, they were persecuted where they lived, and drew attention to their plight, raising awareness that all was not well. Things were somewhat different in Palestine, where many of the relatively numerous Christians hastened to leave, though how far they were forced to do so remains uncertain and controversial. As for Iraq and Syria, the small Christian populations there were initially ignored, although they too had been gradually (and progressively) depleted by emigration over several generations. After 2003, the pace quickened. Christians and other religious minorities were no longer even notionally welcome in Iraq, and militant Islamic groups targeted them as much, if not more, than they did each other. As the unrest spread to Syria, so did the anti-Christian feeling, with the result that virtually the entire Christian population of Iraq and Syria has now left and will not be going back.

This tragic situation has been complicated by the fact that many Muslims have fled as well, especially those who had been Westernised to some extent and who were therefore prime targets of the emerging Islamic State in Syria (ISIS). The European Union suddenly found itself being overrun, not by thousands but by millions of escapees whom it could not accommodate, not to mention several million more sub-Saharan economic migrants, who took advantage of the chaos in Libya to seek passage on boats across the Mediterranean. The human disaster that has resulted from this is regularly documented on television, and appeals are constantly being made to the charitable feelings of Europeans (and Americans) to come to their aid and take them in. The United Kingdom, though geographically distant from the front line, is nevertheless deeply involved in this, because many refugees see it as their destination of choice. Quite a few of them already speak English—as the television reporting makes clear—and British laws on asylum and civil rights are so liberal that once they are in the country it is almost impossible to remove them. The result of this is that there is now a huge camp of would-be asylum seekers in Calais, whom the British will not take and the French are almost desperately eager to be rid of. Well-meaning British people, including many Christians, want to open the gates to them, but the fear of uncontrolled immigration fuels chauvinistic political parties at home and scares the government into inaction. The truth is that we cannot cope with these refugees, even if we would like to, but neither do we have any idea what to do with (or for) them, so they remain in a political and juridical limbo that seems likely to continue indefinitely.

Added to all this is the sobering fact that Islamic terrorism in the West—the destruction of which was the original purpose of our military

involvement in the Muslim world—has not been crushed and is alive and well. Furthermore, it is fuelled by a steady stream of recruits from Western countries themselves, including a number of teenage girls who have somehow managed to elude their parents and turn up in Syria as the wives (and fellow fighters) of the male *jihadis* who dominate ISIS. Worse still, the conflict threatens to spread further, as Turkey, Russia and Iran all get caught up in it, often at cross-purposes and with a real danger that they will end up fighting each other, dragging NATO into war along with them.

What has become apparent in all this is that the Western world is unprepared for what is happening, and may be unable to get to grips with it in any satisfactory way. Western leaders believe in secularism and do not want to admit that the problem is fundamentally religious, even though it obviously is. It is only very recently—and reluctantly—that they have begun to recognise the existence of Middle Eastern Christians as a distinct (and disadvantaged) group, and there is still great hesitation about reaching out to them lest their compassion be somehow made to appear anti-Islamic. The churches are in a quandary. They do not want to be labelled anti-Islamic either, but they can hardly repudiate their fellow believers or turn a blind eye to their fate. One man who has done a great deal to help the suffering, both Christians and Muslims, is Canon Andrew White, the Anglican ‘vicar of Baghdad,’ whose personal courage and commitment in the face of danger are a model of Christian discipleship. There are others behind the scenes who are doing equally sterling work, much of which has to remain confidential for the time being, but which will one day come out into the open and (we must hope) be honoured as it deserves to be.

Alongside that however, there is the reaction of the official churches which is often little more than a reflection of the pusillanimous approach being taken by our governments. Some try to explain (if not excuse) the Islamists by claiming that Christians have been just as bad in the past—most notably in the Crusades. Quite apart from the fact that the Crusades ended in failure more than 700 years ago, nobody seems to know enough about them to realise that they were never the equivalent of Islamic *jihad*. The purpose of *jihad* is to spread the Islamic faith, by military means if necessary, whereas the Crusades were intended as a defensive measure to protect the ancestors of those very Christians who are now being expelled from the Middle East. There was no serious attempt to Christianise Muslims, and with very few exceptions, force has never been used as a means of spreading the gospel. Pretending otherwise, as many Christian leaders do, gets us nowhere.

The other tactic widely employed by Western commentators is to claim that the current terrorist attacks have nothing to do with Islam, which is being perverted for political ends by groups that have no standing in the Muslim world. If only that were true! ISIS and its sister organisations could not function without the covert support of radical Islamic governments in places like Saudi Arabia and Iran, and the West does not want to alienate them. But apart from that, a willingness to embrace violence as a means of spreading the faith lies much closer to the heart of Islam than many people are prepared to admit. Muhammad formed and led an army, something that neither Jesus nor his disciples ever managed—or thought appropriate. Christianity survives and expands because it claims to be based on truth, and that claim is open to being tested by anyone who cares to do so. Our critics and atheists are defeated in debate, not decapitated for their blasphemy, as routinely happens in Muslim countries. Yet the archbishop of Canterbury saw fit to open the tenth General Synod of the Church of England with a speech in which he remarked that we, too, have our extremists! This can only be regarded as a misuse of language. There are certainly intolerant Anglican groups that want to force their views down everyone's throats, even if they are a perversion of the Christian faith—WATCH (Women and the Church) and Changing Attitude spring immediately to mind. But not even the outrageously radical bishop of Buckingham would try to blow up the House of Bishops merely because most of its members disagree with him. Our radicals are very tame by comparison with Al Qaeda or Boko Haram, and trying to equate the two does no service to anyone.

Where the churches are at fault is not in their supposedly negative attitudes towards Islam or other religions, but in their failure to promote the faith they claim to profess with any rigour. The moral and spiritual vacuum that lies at the heart of the Church of England is reflected in the anodyne statements of its leaders, but they are just the outward expression of an inward and unspiritual reality. To take but one example, the bishops recently made it clear that same-sex marriage is not an option for the church, but that has not stopped Andrew Foreshaw-Cain, a priest of the London diocese, from contracting one, nor has it prevented him from standing for, and being elected to, the new General Synod. Some people have protested this, but they have been brushed aside, with the result that the church's main legislative body now contains at least one member who has openly defied its teachings and got away with it. How has this happened? Nature abhors a vacuum, and it is no wonder that if the church is as spiritually empty as this, Islamic extremism will not seem

quite so bad. A Muslim cleric who behaved like Mr Foreshaw-Cain would probably not live to tell the tale, but while we would never recommend an Islamic solution to this problem, allowing him (and others like him) to carry on as if nothing has happened is hardly the right answer either. How can a church that lacks integrity possibly act as a bulwark against the threat posed by ISIS and its ilk?

This unwillingness of the church to discipline its openly ungodly members is matched by an equally obvious coyness about the substance of the Christian message. We are not anti-Muslim in the sense that we do not believe that Islam should be persecuted, but neither do we believe that what it teaches is true. Islam denies the incarnation of the Son of God as Jesus Christ. It rejects his atoning sacrifice on the cross. It substitutes an ascension into heaven similar to that of Elijah (or Muhammad, for that matter) for the resurrection. It regards the Trinity as anathema (*shirk*) and those who profess it as blasphemous. How can Christians maintain a favourable attitude towards this? Other faiths hold doctrines that are incompatible with Christianity, but Islam is the only major world religion that came into being because its founder consciously rejected the claims of Christ. Muslims have waged war on Christians from the start, and in the longer historical perspective, they have not done at all badly in the contest. Open the New Testament and read about Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and the seven churches of Asia. Then go to visit them. You will find one of two things—either ruins (like Ephesus) or cities that are virtually one hundred percent Islamic (like Smyrna, now Izmir). In the case of Smyrna/Izmir, the city was mainly Christian as recently as 1922, when the population was forcibly expelled—and this from a country that was supposedly abandoning Islam for Western-style secularism!

Islam claims to be a religion of peace, and many Christians refer to this aspect of it as a bridge to their own faith in the Prince of Peace. But the peace of Christ was achieved by his death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection from the dead—both denied by Islam. Muslim peace, on the other hand, is achieved by eliminating non-Muslims, who inhabit what is known as the Dar al-Harb ('house of war') as opposed to the Dar al-Islam ('house of peace'). When the Dar al-Harb disappears, there will be universal peace, which is what all good Muslims ought to want. They cry 'peace, peace' when there is no peace—and never can be as long as the non-Muslim world exists. Islamic radicalism, with its inbuilt leaning towards terrorism, is here to stay, at least until we all become Muslims. In this situation, the church cannot afford to suggest that Islam can offer its followers everything that the church provides for Christians, or fall for the

false idea that the two religions are virtually the same. If Christianity has nothing to offer Muslims, if the churches lack integrity, and if conversion to Islam promises security in our streets, what is there to stop us from becoming Muslims? Are we just being perverse, or do Jesus Christ and his gospel have something to offer that Muhammad and his teaching do not?

Christians can do little to stop the refugee tide from the Middle East or change the social and political conditions that have produced it. Further intervention by Western governments is liable to make things worse, not better, and we may have to accept that, for the time being at least, there is no alternative to the rule of despotic strongmen who, if nothing else, can at least provide a degree of stability and contain the kind of violence that we are seeing at present. In the longer term however, we do have an answer to the world's problems—Jesus Christ, his saving death and resurrection. It is true that we hold the treasure of the gospel in earthen vessels, but our calling from God is to proclaim and offer that treasure to those who need it, not to apologise for the poor quality of the vessels it comes in. As Paul put it, we do not proclaim ourselves, but Christ, who alone has the power to save. Our convictions do not come from any sense of superiority, but from the message that it is only by dying to self and being born again in Christ that true peace and eternal life can be found. Muslims need to hear that message as much as anyone. Already there are reports of conversions to Christianity in places like Iran, and we know that a significant proportion of refugees have accepted Jesus as their Saviour and been baptised.

What this means for the future of Islam only time will tell, but it may be that God is using the present distress to set his children free from the tyranny of a false religion. If that is true, then we must be ready to receive those who have been delivered from it as brothers and sisters in the Lord. His heavenly kingdom is the true 'house of peace' and it is our duty, both as individuals and as a church, to proclaim the One who alone is the way, the truth and the life. This is not a job for people whose highest ambition seems to be a desire to 'facilitate' conversations that will lead to 'good disagreement.' Rather, the times require men and women of real conviction who know the truth, and who have been set free by it. Let us pray that such people will come to the fore and bear witness, even at the cost of their lives, to the one and only way that sin and error can be overcome.

GERALD BRAY