

Muslims: Friends or Enemies?

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If you travel on the bus from Mysore to Ooty in South India you will find that the bus stops at a little wayside Hindu shrine. The local priest boards the bus and offers flowers and holy water to those who wish to reverence the local deity. The idea is to provide a traveller's blessing for passengers whose journey takes them seven thousand feet up into the hills. I have made that particular journey many times and the arrival of the priest was a moment I never relished. There was always that slight awkwardness in signalling to him that he should pass me by. I remember doing so on one occasion and being rather pleased when the man sitting next to me did the same. Looking at him more closely I realised that he was a Muslim. We exchanged glances, united by the common feeling that we were two monotheists amongst a bus load of idol worshippers. The truth is that in India it is not all that difficult to look on Muslims as allies!

Some years ago now I was at a Conference (in this country) on Christian Approaches to World Religions, leading a seminar on Hinduism. The Conference sell-out, however, was not my modest effort, but the session on Islam. Clearly there was great interest. There were two main speakers - I shall not identify them, though they are both well known evangelical leaders - and it seemed to me, they were going in different directions. The first saw Islam as the enemy. His main purpose was to awaken his audience to the threat that Islam posed and to evoke an appropriately militant response. The second wanted, by contrast, to examine Islam more closely, particularly in terms of the way Islam saw itself, and to work out points of contact and mutual understanding between Islam and Christianity. The first man got a much better hearing. You could tell that people were with him. This was not really because he was a better speaker. It just seemed easier to sound a battle call than to describe a landscape.

Ever since that conference I have been thinking about these two different approaches, and trying also to answer the fundamental question that we began with. Perhaps a good place for us all to start, whatever answer we may finally come up with, is to make sure that we understand who Muslims really are. I am not really thinking here of courses on Islam (though that is a good idea) but rather an examination of our own presuppositions. I have to warn you that this can be uncomfortable. Scholars (the late Edward Said is an obvious example) make an overwhelming case for the unpleasant fact that Western society, particularly in the nineteenth century, created stereotypes of 'the Orient' that bore little or no resemblance to reality. They were consistently hostile to Islam and told us more about the prejudices and shortcomings of the West than anything else. Such unsavoury realities as the way that we stereotyped oriental sexual behaviour (lascivious men and passive women), created the myth of 'the wily Oriental' and vilified legitimate Muslim leaders such as the mahdi in Sudan, are difficult to deny. In case we think that this is just a matter of Victorian hypocrisy, there is plenty of evidence that things are not much better today. Aided by the media we have specialised in recent times in villains from the Islamic fold - the Ayatollah Khomeini, Yasser Arafat, Saddam Hussein, Gaddafi, and most recently Osama bin Laden - and, I suspect, made little attempt to understand the Islamic anger over such matters as the Salman Rushdie affair, the US presence in Saudi Arabia and the Western support for the Israelis against the Palestinians. The truth is that misunderstanding, even hostility, seems to be the normal attitudes to Islam. Are we as Christians merely being carried along?

This raises the next important question: what do Muslims think of us? By 'us' I mean the people who live in the West and have Western values. Of course from the point of view of the average Muslim, that would include Christians. I suspect that the gut-reaction is also usually one of hostility. Most Muslim memories go back to the Crusades, and in almost every Muslim country in the world the memories of Western imperialism are still very fresh. The post-colonial arrangements have left them with little choice. In West Asia, for example, the presence of the State of Israel is, to the average Muslim, a contemporary evidence of Western double-dealing. They also feel that recent history, right up to the current occupation of Iraq, confirms the feeling that Western 'concern' for the region has to do with what the West can get out of it. Some of these judgements are fair and some are not. No doubt just as the West has its stereotypes, so Muslims have built up stereotypes of the West. They think that all Western women are 'loose' perhaps, because of their style of clothing, or that Western people care nothing for family life. They do not understand our concern over the Salman Rushdie affair (burning books has unhappy precedents in Europe) or our sympathies with Israel because of that people's recent traumatic past.

Clearly there is a tremendous need on both sides of more understanding. We need to be fair to each other in our thinking. One thing which concerns me is that this does not seem to be much of an ideal among Christians. You hear people say things like 'Why should we allow Muslims to build mosques in this country when we know that Christians in Muslim countries are being persecuted?' But are these the sort of arguments we ought to be using? Leaving aside the fact that in Muslim countries there is usually at least some religious freedom (it would admittedly be good if there were more) the question for Christians is whether we believe in fair play or not. Our responsibility is to be just to others whatever their attitude to us, and particularly so in the light of a long and depressing history of Christian religious persecution, which others have not forgotten even if we have.

I also believe that a policy of conspicuous justice is in our interests as Christians with a concern for reaching Muslims. A Muslim writing recently about Muslim 'fundamentalism' (Akeel Bilgrami in the Indian magazine 'Economic and Political Weekly') has pointed out that moderates in the Muslim camp have been consistently marginalised by extremists, simply because extremists seem to be standing up for the cause and not giving in to Western belligerence. This prompts an alarming thought. May it not be that the current wave of Muslim fervour has actually been produced by our highhandedness. We speak cheerfully about Islam being the next great threat (or alternately the next great mission field) now that the Communist world has disintegrated, but how does that sound to our Muslim neighbours?

Is there a way forward in the present situation? I have a very simple solution. Let us make friends with people, especially with those we hope to evangelise, and especially with those who may suppose that we are going to act as if we were their enemies. Firstly it is good policy. An observant visitor to India remarked: 'missionaries who call them (the Indians) good for nothing, have no success, and those who like them have considerable success.' I am reminded of Aesop's fable about the sun and the wind trying to get the man to take his coat off. It was the warmth of the sun, not the force of the wind, that did the trick. Also, it is the method that Jesus used. He was the friend of the very people that others despised - the tax collectors and prostitutes - and related wonderfully well to those that others treated as 'the enemy', such as the Samaritan woman.

Finally, may I suggest a few practical tips that others have given to me and which I have found helpful. Do not, on any account, believe everything that you hear or see in the media. The modern media have a desperate record in terms of creating and perpetuating unfair stereotypes. It is the nature of modern news gathering that it is only really interested in the sensational and the extreme. As Christians we cannot afford to allow our attitudes to be formed by such agents. Secondly, there is a right sequence in all our relationships with people who are different from us, namely: understanding - evaluation - action, and we get into a serious tangle if we get these in the wrong order. I do not mean by this that we should have nothing to do with Muslims until we have taken a course on Islamics. I mean that as we get to know Muslims there should be a considerable period of time when our chief aim is not so much to tell them something, but to hear what they have to say. Thirdly, human friendship is a great blessing. So enjoy yourself. Getting to know somebody of a different culture is an enriching experience. So be enriched. Out of shared experience and mutual enrichment, the flower of friendship grows. After that almost anything is possible.

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