

Churchman

EDITORIAL

The Weapons of our Warfare

It started as a quiet, almost underground protest in New York. Plans were afoot to build an Islamic study centre and mosque only a few hundred metres away from Ground Zero. As word of this started to reach ordinary people in the street, disquiet and an increasingly vocal opposition to the project started to build. Some of the protesters had religious motives and would probably have been against building a mosque anywhere in the United States, but the movement of protest was much broader than that. There were those who had no particular faith but who had lost close friends and relatives on 11 September 2001, and who felt that such a shrine, so near to the site of the atrocity, was insensitive (to put it mildly). Some of them compared it to the attempt made by a group of Polish nuns to build a convent near the site of the Auschwitz concentration camp, a site regarded by Jews as sacred to the memory of the victims of the Holocaust. The nuns had offered to pray for the souls of the dead victims, but that merely added insult to injury in the eyes of Jewish survivors, and eventually the pope intervened to quash the project.

That firm, but diplomatic solution to a potential embarrassment was not open to the New York protesters, partly because the United States is a secular society in which freedom of worship is granted impartially to all, and partly because Islam has no pope to intervene and resolve the problem with the stroke of a pen. The result was a tussle between Muslims and American liberals on one side and the majority of the population, religious and non-religious, on the other. Forced to defend their position, leading Muslim activists and their supporters claimed that the projected mosque would be a contribution to peace and mutual understanding, despite the fact that the mere suggestion of building it had already produced the very opposite. The liberal establishment quickly joined in on their side, not so much because they wanted to lend their support to Islam or even to defend the US constitution, but because it was a golden opportunity to spit on the ignorant masses whom they see as their real target.

That this was what was really going on became clear as events proceeded. An obscure pastor in Florida called Terry Jones decided to launch a Qur'an burning event at his local church to commemorate the 11 September massacre. People like Mr Jones are rare, even in the American South (which outsiders think consists of nothing but that sort of person), and it is hard to believe that more than a handful of cranks would ever have taken up his call, but before anyone knew it, his name (and his proposed event) had become headline news around the world. Improbable as it may seem, President Obama and the pope were on the telephone and in the media, begging Pastor Jones to call his stunt off, as if the future of the world depended on suppressing such an outrageous insult to Islam. Meanwhile, perhaps to demonstrate just how offended they were, Muslim activists in Pakistan and elsewhere decided to burn a few churches in reprisal, though for some reason nobody of any importance pleaded with them to stop what they were doing. After all, how could burning a church in South Asia, attended by only a few hundred worshippers, possibly be as important as burning a few books, read by practically no-one in Florida?

The whole thing reeked of media hype and the aim was obvious. Pastor Jones, for all his foolishness, was not going to do any harm to Muslims merely by burning a few copies of their sacred book. Of course we would not like it if Muslims in Saudi Arabia decided to burn stacks of Bibles, but neither would we go berserk at the thought and rush to destroy the nearest mosque in retaliation. Nor was Mr Jones threatening anyone's religious liberty, although if he had offered to pray on public land before torching the Qur'ans he might have been accused of breaching the wall of separation between church and state and been put on trial for it. The media seized on this unlikely specimen of religious zeal because to them, Terry Jones represented everything they want to portray the anti-Islamic lobby as—gun-toting, redneck, fundamentalist Christians who ought to be silenced, if not totally eliminated from the public domain. They had found their man, and before anyone knew it, he was being offered up on the airwaves as a typical example of the evils in American society that thwart our efforts to build constructive relationships with the religion of peace (which is what the word 'Islam' means).

Looking at these events from afar, it is easy to think that too much has been made of incidents that did not deserve such media attention. The Florida burning was called off, as it certainly should have been, and the New York

affair could have been handled more diplomatically, perhaps by offering the Muslims another site in a different part of the city. To say that however, is to miss the point. The would-be mosque builders were certainly aware of what they were doing and must have known that it would provoke a reaction, though they may not have guessed how deep it would be. No doubt they sincerely believe that they are trying to promote peace and a deeper understanding of Islam, though their interpretation of what that means is quite different from what their gullible Western supporters imagine. A mosque is not a concert hall, library or auditorium in the way that we would understand those things—it is a place of worship, a fact to which those invited to it are meant to pay homage to by dressing modestly and removing their footwear. What these men were out to build was not a place of religious dialogue and encounter, but a sacred space in which their view of the universe would dominate and all others would be tolerated guests. In other words, what they wanted was to create a miniature version of the Islamic world, right in the heart of Manhattan.

The clarity of this aim has special relevance for people throughout the Western world, where freedom of conscience and worship has developed within what is essentially a Christian framework. Our understanding of what those things mean is governed by the view that church and state are two different things, however much they may be related to each other. In some countries they are completely separate, in others the state supports a number of different churches while in a few (like England) there is an official state church which in actual practice represents the others on official occasions and promotes tolerance for them at other times. Islam knows of no such separation of powers. There is no equivalent of a church in the Muslim world, and there is no real equivalent of the state either. The secular and religious spheres are two dimensions of a single reality, traditionally called the ‘dar al-Islam’ or ‘house of peace’. This stands in contrast to the ‘dar-al-harb’ or ‘house of war’ which is the unfortunate situation in which all those not in the house of peace (i.e. Islam) find themselves. Nobody wants to blow them up, of course, but that is what happens in war, and if you insist on staying out of the house of peace, you have only yourself to blame if you end up as a victim.

Seeing ourselves as others see us is always a difficult exercise, but probably nowhere more so than in the encounter with Islam. For example, it is a

commonplace of Western discourse that Muslim women are badly treated. But ask a devout Muslim about it and he (more rarely she) may well tell you that it is Western women who suffer, because they are forced to live like men and have nobody to love and care for them. They may even point to Western women who have embraced Islam for precisely that reason. Most of us would be baffled by such a reply, but that is often how they think.

Coming to terms with this very different mentality is extremely hard, and it has to be said that few Christians have even begun to think about it seriously. This is not to deny that there are many dedicated Christian evangelists in and to the Muslim world, many of whom have spent their lives in this study. But praiseworthy and significant as that is, it has not made much of an impact in the wider Christian community. Very few ordinary Christians have any real understanding of Islam, fewer still have read the Qur'an and almost none have any idea of how Muslims view Jesus, the Bible and Christianity in general. They do not even realise that Islam is the only major world religion that has emerged in direct opposition to Christianity, which the Prophet Muhammad knew about and which he could have embraced. If we believe that Jesus Christ was God's final Word to mankind, what are we to say about a man who disagreed so strongly with that that he set up his own religion to replace the Christian church? Someone like the Buddha could not have known the truth of Christ even if he had wanted to, but Muhammad could and to some extent did. The problem is that he rejected it!

For this reason, Christians cannot be content merely to look for 'common ground' among what purport to be the three 'religions of Abraham'—Judaism, Christianity and Islam. We know about Judaism but have not really rejected it, because Jesus the Messiah is the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises. But we cannot accommodate Islam in this way, nor do Muslims accept Christianity. They have strong objections to the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, to go no further, and what would Christianity be without them?

One way in which Christians can and should approach Islam is by examining what the Qur'an says about Jesus and other figures in the Bible. How historically accurate are its claims, and what are we to make of them? The Bible has survived centuries of acute criticism, but the Qur'an has never been investigated using the same criteria. If nothing else, Christians should be aware of the sacred

book of Islam and know how to interpret it in dialogue with Muslims. We are on strong ground here, because the Qur'an's portrayal of the Bible is not historical, but we need to say so, and to know what we are talking about.

The task is urgent, because in a few years it may be practically illegal to evangelise Muslims in most Western countries. It is already the case that those who do this on a full-time basis have had to conceal themselves and their activities, so as to avoid possible attack, and the time may soon be coming when our ever-liberal governments will make Christian evangelism a form of hate speech if directed against other religions. It is already difficult to mount public opposition to homosexual practice, and if that form of 'intolerance' can be effectively banned, what hope is there for those who want to persuade people to change their faith?

Meanwhile, the onward march of Islam will continue. Already there are whole districts of British cities which are effectively Muslim, and the residents will see to it that no outsider will be allowed to buy property in those areas and move in to dilute the population. Many, and possibly most, of the food served in public institutions like hospitals and schools is prepared according to the rules of halal (the Muslim equivalent of kosher) without a word being said about it. Christians can be told not to wear a cross around their neck at work, but who would dare tell a Muslim that she cannot wear a headscarf? Only the *burqa* (the garment that covers everything from head to toe) is under threat, but as few Muslim women wear it and it is banned in several Muslim countries, it can hardly be regarded as essential to Islamic practice.

The awful truth is that Western governments are scared because they know that if they come down against Islam, or are thought to be coming down against it, they risk seeing bombs go off in their cities. Britain in particular has to be careful, because in 2012 London will be hosting the Olympics. Has anyone forgotten that the terrorist attacks on 7 July 2005 happened the day after it was announced that the city had received those games? All it will take in 2012 is a few well-timed phone calls from people in suitably foreign accents, warning that bombs have been planted in strategic locations around an essentially indefensible city, and the whole event could be ruined. Whether we like it or not, our religious and social values are ultimately incompatible with those of Islam. It is a force that seeks to overwhelm us for our own good and

we have no choice but to counter it as best we can. We are not called to employ the same methods that are used against us, however. The Apostle Paul wrote that ‘the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but have divine power to destroy strongholds’ (2 Cor. 10:4). Ultimately it will not be by power or by might but by the Spirit of God that we shall triumph, and we must always bear that in mind. The power of love is greater than the power of hate, even if in the short term it often seems that hate has the upper hand. As we move into the second decade of the third Christian millennium let us gird up our loins with the armour of God and be ready for the battle that we face, remembering that if we put our trust in God we shall never be defeated.

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