

# ISLAM, VIOLENCE AND THE POPE

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Margaret and I spent a week this summer in Ballycastle on the North Antrim coast of Northern Ireland. We loved the cliff scenery, the Giants Causeway, the empty sandy beaches and the old fashioned little towns unspoilt by tourism. In Northern Ireland the worst days are over. I never saw a soldier and you can drive across the border into the Republic without any police check at all.

But you still can't go to Northern Ireland without remembering the old history of hatred. Walk around the walls of Derry, look out over the Protestant area and see the union jacks and the murals saying "Still under siege". Walk round past the sinister fortified police post and look out over the Bogside with its republican emblems and flags, and memories of the parachute regiment and Bloody Sunday come flooding back. Time and time again a road a sign - Enniskillen, Omagh – brings the reminder of some bloody atrocity or other. And even now on the local news in Belfast a Catholic family was telling how they had been driven from their homes by loyalist gunmen.

You can say a lot about the conflict in Ireland. But religion has helped keep it alive. I have never forgotten George Caird, when he was Moderator of the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, telling me how he went with a church delegation to meet secretly with leaders of the Provisional IRA. And he met Shamus Toomey, commander of the Belfast brigade of the IRA. "Do you know" said Toomey "if it wasn't for my faith I wouldn't have the strength to go on". No doubt Ian Paisley would say the same. Over the centuries religion has helped the wounds of Ireland fester.

The truth is all the great world religions have a dark underside. Christianity has, Judaism has, Buddhism has, Hinduism has and yes Islam has too. Some people seem to think no-one should say that. Whenever there is a bombing some people say "The people who did this were not real Moslems". That's too easy a way out.

I happen to believe the attack on Iraq was unwise and immoral. But nothing can justify the suicide bombers or Hezbollah's rocketing of Israel, the July bombings here in London or 9/11. Last night on the news a Turkish man had been kidnapped in Iraq. The last words he heard were "Allah Akbar" before they shot him in the head. All of these acts are motivated by a form of Islamic faith and it is dishonest to pretend otherwise. And Islam has a problem with intolerance too. I was told by a member of this congregation how on entering Saudi Arabia his Bible was taken off him. Imagine a Koran was confiscated at Heathrow can you imagine the outrage? Where is the protest around the Muslim world about the denial of freedom of worship for Christians in Saudi Arabia?

Last week the Pope made his comments. I am not quite sure what he meant by them. They were at the very least badly phrased. I would like to think that was a simple error. But this is the Pope who went him went to Auschwitz and made no apology for anti-Semitism. This is the Pope who called Buddhism "Auto-erotic spirituality". This Pope is not known for his sympathy with other faiths. Actually to get the real feel about this Pope – this is the Pope who attacked Harry Potter – calling it a seduction corrupting the mind of the young. This is no liberal Pope.

But in so far as part of what Benedict said was that Islam has a problem with violence - if anything doubts that the response proved it. It was a little bit like "Don't you dare say I'm violent otherwise I'll kill you". Demonstrations, threats. Rioters chanting "The Pope must die". In Lahore someone carried the placard "Behead those who insult the peace of Allah". In the west Bank churches were attacked. When the Pope made his apology Ayatollah Khatami in Iran said "The Pope should fall on his knees in front of a senior Moslem cleric and try to understand Islam". Like Christianity, Judaism Hinduism and Buddhism -Islam has a problem with violence and intolerance.

You can see why some people might say why not do away with religion all together? But if food is diseased we don't give up eating, but look for good wholesome food; if water is polluted we don't stop drinking, but look for good clear water. Because we can pervert faith, it doesn't make it invalid, nor deny the reality of many people's encounter with God. Religion is suicide bombers but it is also Desmond Tutu and Martin Luther King. The answer to bad religion is not no religion but good religion.

So what is the way forward? Firstly all the religious traditions need to recognise the problem within themselves and take responsibility for it. We start with the plank in our eyes. There are verses in the Old Testament which advocate see Israel's God as a God of War and advocate violence. There is a kind of fundamentalist Christianity, especially in the United States, which poses real dangers to the peace of the world. When the head of one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States – the Southern Baptists – says "God almighty does not hear the prayer of a Jew" something evil is stirring. Isn't it time that some one broke it to him that Jesus was a Jew? There are those who look for a war in the Middle East because they believe it will usher in the second coming of Christ. We need to renew our faith to make it more open, liberal and Christ-like.

At the heart of Christian faith is that Jesus who they called the Prince of Peace. It is that Jesus who said "love your enemies do good to those who hate you". If you go to Calvary you can watch him die saying "Father forgive them for they know not what they do". This is the Jesus who said "Those who live by the sword die by the sword". The one thing that can be certain is that he never had a problem with violence.

The Gospel is peace not war, reconciliation not division, tolerance not bigotry. There is a wonderful text in Paul which may be the most radical statement in the whole of Scripture. In I Corinthians 13:2 we read "I may have faith strong enough to move mountains but if I have no love I am nothing". You can burn with religious fervour but if there's no loving in you it's absolutely without point. In 1 John we read "Those who say I love God, and hate their brothers and sisters are liars". That's the message that one of these days is going to put bigoted Christianity out of business. So firstly within our own faith community let's seek a deep renewal into the spirit of Christ.

Then secondly we must seek to draw closer to the other great faiths of the world. Writing a few years ago Hans Kung said this: "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions. No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundation of the religions."

Two weeks ago we did a little of that here by asking Rabbi Sybil Sheridan of the Wimbledon synagogue to preach. It was wonderful to have her in our pulpit. At the door afterwards

someone said to her “Do you know you sounded just like our minister?” I must admit I wondered how she would take that! But she was picked carefully! But of course the point was correct. There was hardly a word in that sermon I could not have said. All the great world faiths are rich in the truth of God.

Do you remember that story of how a group of blind beggars try to describe an elephant? One starting from the animal's legs described it a tree, another grasping its trunk assumed it must be a hose, while the third of its tail, insisted that elephant was like a rope. They were all correct of course but none of them had the complete picture. So she pointed God is bigger than any of our faith traditions can grasp. Well this week I was reading “Do Christians know how to be spiritual?” by John Drane. And I read exactly the same story. Different faith, same story, same truth. How often that is true.

We need to draw on the richness of all the world faiths.

Let me give you some quotations:

From the Koran

The worshippers of the All-Merciful are they who tread gently upon the earth, and when the ignorant address them, they reply, "Peace!" if you save one human life, it is as if you have saved the whole of humanity."

From the Jewish Talmud

“What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary” (*Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbat 31a)

Or from the Sikh scriptures:

“Never does hatred cease by hating; hatred ceases by love"

Are any of those less true because they come from a scripture other than our own?

Dialogue is never denying or diluting that which you yourself believe. I felt an immense bond with Rabbi Sheridan. But for me everything I believe about God comes to a focus in the person of Jesus, for me he is the word made flesh, the human face of God. That is not a belief Jews or Moslems share. But the more we can understand each other the more chance this world has of living in peace and we may hope each to learn more of the God whom we all have glimpsed. "No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions".

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