

# Religion and Secularism in Britain today

Colin Roberts

A Newman Association day conference at Warwick University on the 9th March brought together nearly seventy delegates from different parts of the country to debate the rights of religious minorities in our society and to examine the potential for conflict between religious fundamentalism and secularism. Three specialists working in the field of inter-faith and inter-community relations addressed the complex nature of these issues. They were the Reverend Dr. Clinton Bennett, the Reverend Dr. Christopher Lamb and Professor Edward Hulmes. Dr. Bennett is Executive Secretary for Inter-Faith Relations at the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland, Dr. Lamb is Community Relations Advisor for the Diocese of Coventry and Professor Hulmes is Spalding Professorial Fellow in World Religions in the Department of Theology at the University of Durham and Fellow of the Centre of Theological Enquiry at Princeton in the USA.

Against the background of the Rushdie affair and the community tensions generated by the Gulf War the conference focussed on the contrasting attitudes of Islam and Christianity towards secularism. It also examined the different ways in which Christians respond to religious pluralism. Does the decade of evangelisation which all the churches have endorsed conflict with inter-faith dialogue? Should evangelism be directed at those in our society who have no religious belief rather than at theists like Muslims and Jews? What lessons has the Church learned from the gradual process of secularisation of British society and how should Catholics communicate those insights to their fellow citizens of other faiths whose culture and background make it difficult for them to engage positively with secular culture?

## *Islam and Secularism*

The Muslim faith does not recognise the separation of the religious and the secular. The whole of life is seen as a unity and, as a religious system and construct. Islam addresses not just the individual but society as a whole in its political, social and cultural dimensions. Despite their common Abrahamic roots there is much that separates Christians and Muslims. The history of relations between the two faiths is not a happy one. Apart from memories of the crusades Christianity is all too often bound up in Muslim eyes with the triumph of Western colonialism. There is an emotional feeling that Christianity is the religion of the first world which is European and white. Saddam Hussein tried to play on these latent prejudices when he called for a Muslim jihad against the West, despite the fact that his own regime is secularist. At a deeper cultural level Muslims and Christians are divided by

the whole sweep of European civilization, which has included the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the rise of the modern liberal state and the secularization of society. Jews who have lived for centuries in Europe and who have made a significant contribution to unfolding European thought and culture do not experience the same cultural divide.

Dr. Bennett and Dr. Lamb described the current state of mind of the British Muslim community. Aware that their views on issues like blasphemy and the status of women do not resonate with the majority, Muslims feel misunderstood and isolated. This in turn has generated widespread anxiety and unease. In recent months in Britain there have been cases of racial attacks and of places of worship being firebombed. On top of all this the Gulf War has cruelly exposed the rhetoric of unity which is so important to the self-understanding of the Islamic community; it has also generated disunity in the mosque and within families.

Muslims have the conviction of belonging to a world-wide body of believers to which, in principle, they feel a stronger sense of loyalty than to the nation state. Their sense of identification with Muslims everywhere binds them to a significant world community and this in itself is a source of self-confidence. Despite its emphasis on unity, Islam contains within itself tensions and divisions. There is the religious split between Sunnis and Shias and tensions that arise from national, cultural and racial differences. It must not be forgotten that the Iran-Iraq war was also a conflict between Persians and Arabs.

It would also be a mistake to assume that British Islam is monolithic. Different mosques serve different communities whether Ugandan, Pakistani or whatever. The majority of British Muslims come from the Indian sub-continent and the advent of the British Raj was traumatic to Muslims who had dominated India for six hundred years. It faced them with the dilemma of how to be a Muslim in a state in which Islam is no longer supreme. They responded in different ways. Some emigrated to Afghanistan, others did not actively oppose British rule but tried to have as little to do with the British as possible, others again sought refuge in a more spiritual and devotional Islam and accepted that it was possible to be a good Muslim in a critical context of separation of state and mosque. The older generation which emigrated to Britain still reflects these different traditions. But whether they are confrontational or quietist all are facing the problem and tensions of being a Muslim in a non-Muslim country. The outplaying of this can be seen in the Rushdie affair.

Since Islam embraces both the political and social it is difficult for British Muslims to come to terms with their minority status and, in particular, with British secular society which dissolves moral and religious certainties. Muslims accuse secularists of hypocrisy. They claim that only lip service is paid to the rights of minorities in Britain, proof of which was seen in the public indifference to Muslim objections to *The Satanic verses*. For the Muslim the Koran is literally the speech of God and this rules out critical

interpretation. Hence it is virtually impossible for the devout Muslim to read theology at a British University where great emphasis is placed on submitting sacred texts to critical exegesis.

Muslims have a clear vision of the society they want for Britain. We have even seen the formation of an Islamic party. Some Muslims look forward to a mass conversion to Islam while others hope to infuse society with Islamic principles without everyone having necessarily to convert. In the light of this forthright social agenda can and should Christians offer an equally clear vision?

### *Initiating dialogue*

The cultural and religious divide that has opened up between Muslims and the wider community has posed the question of how we can live together in a pluralist society and what it means to be British. Since the Gulf War many schools and church groups have wanted to invite Muslim speakers to talk about Islam. This is a very positive development although it has presented certain problems arising from the speakers' lack of command of English and their unpreparedness to deal with British teenagers' often irreverent approach to religion. There are also cultural as opposed to religious attitudes that can easily lead to misunderstandings and breakdowns in communication.

Does pluralism necessarily imply integration? Is there a case to be made for the separate development of the Muslim community in Britain? If this implies the recognition of Islamic inheritance laws which discriminate against women or of special blasphemy laws to protect Islam then this would be clearly unacceptable to the majority of citizens in this country. Most Muslims, however, favour integration. But on what terms?

Education provides challenges but also new opportunities for understanding between faiths. In principle there is no reason why Muslims, like Catholics, should not have their own schools. In practice integration might be better served by making state schools more sensitive to the needs of religious minorities. The 1988 Education Reform Act, which set up the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education, has specified that school worship in state schools should be 'mainly or broadly Christian'. However, it has also devolved to local religious advisory boards the task of providing guidelines for how religion is to be tackled in local schools. Members of different faiths are represented on these boards and this provides, albeit in a restricted area, opportunities for better understanding and for the emergence of a common municipal mind on religious issues.

### *Catholics and secularism*

The British Muslim sense of living in an embattled ghetto is paralleled by the experience of Catholics in Britain in the nineteenth century. Not only were Catholics mainly Irish and hence outsiders but the Church promoted an often aggressive separateness. Catholics should therefore be well placed to understand the psychology of present-day British Muslims. Two factors

were crucial in integrating Catholics into the mainstream of British society. Firstly, with the passage of time, their sociological profile changed from being mainly Irish working class to English or at least British and middle class. No value judgement is implied by this. It is simply a matter of sociological fact. In the second place a sea-change occurred in the Church with the Second Vatican Council and the new spirit of *aggiornamento*. Allowing for obvious differences between the two faiths it is nevertheless instructive to draw an analogy between Muslims today and Catholics in the last century. Like the Irish then, today's Muslims are recent immigrants who feel powerless and are frequently consigned to low-paid and unskilled work. No doubt, over time, education and social assimilation will remove many of the cultural and psychological barriers that the present generation is experiencing so intensely. In the nineteenth century the emergence of the Italian state and the temporal power of the Pope introduced an international dimension to Catholic political debate. Muslims in this country are deeply influenced by what is happening in the Middle East. A resolution of the Palestinian problem would no doubt have a profound effect on improving community relations between Muslims, Jews and Christians here at home.

Unlike British Muslims, Christians in this country have an ambivalent view of secularism. Some regard it as a coherent ideology of materialistic individualism which corrodes the moral fabric of society and marginalises believers. This is the fundamentalist reflex. Others can see a positive side to secularism. It strips away social pressures and allows people to make up their own mind. Probably the majority of Catholics have some sympathy for both viewpoints. Arguably the quality of belief in a secular age has gained in authenticity and courage. In this respect modern Christians are closer in spirit to those of the early church than to those who lived in the centuries of Christendom. Dr. Lamb made the very interesting observation that Catholics are more inclined to regard religion—any religion—as better than none at all and he questioned whether such indiscriminating approval does justice to those who have rejected belief on sincerely held grounds.

### *Christian responses to religious pluralism*

An outline Christian response to religious pluralism can be found in 1 Peter 3:13—17. Peter exhorts the Christian to reverence Christ as his Lord, to defend his faith if anyone calls him to account for it and to do so with gentleness. Professor Hulmes analysed some of the pitfalls in Christian-Muslim dialogue. There was a danger of abandoning a high Christology in favour of a unitarianism which would be more acceptable to Islamic interlocutors. This would be to empty Christian dialogue of real content. There was equally a danger of Catholics failing to communicate what they believed because of a lack of sound understanding of their own faith and of how doctrine had developed

down the centuries—a very apposite comment at a gathering held under the patronage of Cardinal Newman. Knowledge of the Church's doctrine of the Trinity is a case in point and particularly pertinent in the case of Christian-Muslim dialogue. There was a further danger in Christians according their theological doubts 'credal status', to quote Professor Hulmes, and in elevating Christian agnosticism to a new 'confessionalism'. Faced with Islamic certainties Christians are challenged to tease out what is normative and prescriptive in their own faith.

The question of evangelising those of other faiths proved controversial. Some conference delegates expressed the view that the growth of dogma and doctrine over the centuries had obscured the simple message of Christianity, while others stressed that evangelism should not attempt to convert but to reach out in love and understanding to another community of faith. Emphasis should be placed on what we share in common as 'people of the Book', to borrow an Islamic phrase, and on what unites us at a deeper spiritual level. Sufism was particularly appealing to non-Muslims interested in Islamic mysticism although, as Professor Hulmes reminded us, Sufism has been condemned as heretical by mainstream Islam.

A realistic Christian approach to Muslims would start from the clear recognition that religious dialogue with other faiths does not sit easily with the Islamic mind. As Professor Hulmes expressed it pithily: 'The call of the minaret is not an invitation to tea but a call to submission'. In any case have Christians really thought through the implications of dialogue? Is dialogue possible if one considers one's own deepest religious beliefs true in an absolute sense and those of one's interlocutor defective or even false? Genuine dialogue is after all a risky adventure in which one opens oneself to the possibility of being persuaded that the other is right. To enter dialogue without having made this leap is like having one's cake and eating it.

One conference delegate expressed the view that the Spirit works through all religions, although it was objected that this poses a difficult theological conundrum for Christians since it assumes that the Holy Spirit can somehow be disconnected from the Second Person of the Trinity. Do we not in the creed profess our belief in the Holy Spirit who 'proceeds from the Father and the Son'? How can we decline to spread the Good News if we believe that Christ who died and rose from the dead is the Saviour of the World? At issue for Christians is how we understand the nature of Christ. Do we regard Him as the perfect example of how a Christian ought to live or does the person of Christ represent a unique, unrepeatable and specific act of God which forms, shapes and inspires the lives of those who follow Him? The way we answer this question has deep political and theological implications for what we mean by the kingdom and how we enter into religious dialogue.