

ARCHES



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Hope and Dialogue



In the immediate aftermath of the events of 11th of September 2001, many voices expressed concern that the world had witnessed the first sparks that would ignite the third, and

possibly final global war. Events that have occurred since have not done much to dampen those dreadful predictions. Considering that we have witnessed two major military assaults over the past four years, with a third and possibly even fourth in the pipelines, and a constantly rising wave of terrorism, extremism and fanaticism of all sorts around the world, one would be excused for believing the end is truly nigh.

However, we often focus on the negatives, of which there are plenty without doubt, when there are crucial positives staring us squarely in the face.

Ever since those events, the world has seen an unprecedented debate on a number of crucial issues all of which relate to the future which we as a world population wish to carve for future generations. There have been undoubtedly some very low points within that debate process, and some extremely detrimental discourse that has emerged from all sides, but there have also been numerous extraordinary highs. Whether on the political, social, ideological or faith levels, we now

witness a series of debates, dialogues, talks, meetings, forums and exchanges which can only be seen as very positive and extremely constructive.

Muslim engagement in all segments of public life throughout Britain as well as some parts of Europe, especially on the political front, must be seen as a landmark within the evolution of our nations and societies. Not only does that allow for those who feel frustrated and marginalised to have a say and induce change in a positive and constructive manner, it also creates platforms from which ideas can be exchanged, opinions aired, stands illustrated and thoughts expressed openly and freely. This has to be a good thing.

And in an attempt to promote that atmosphere of open and constructive dialogue, better understanding, appreciation and awareness of 'the other' and clearer perceptions of the reality within which we function, The Cordoba Foundation presents its very first issue of 'Arches'. This bi-monthly newsletter will offer commentaries on the pressing issues of our times, interviews with those involved in the promotion of dialogue and the process of bridge building, as well as news of events and people that serve the cause of the collaboration, continuation and dialogue of the cultures and civilisations of our world.

Anas Altikriti
CEO - The Cordoba Foundation

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Dr Anthony McRoy

What are the basis for a theological dialogue between Muslim and Christians, when there are fundamental disagreements on basic tenets, such as the status of Jesus?

We must distinguish four possibilities. Firstly, there is the kind of ecumenical, 'We're all the same really, all roads lead to God' dialogue pushed by liberal/modernists. For people who take their faiths seriously, namely Evangelical Christians and orthodox Muslims, this is a non-starter. The Bible is quite clear that salvation comes through Jesus alone, John 14:6 ('No one comes to the Father except through Me'); Acts 4:12 ('there is salvation in no one else'), and Islam is equally specific that salvation depends on belief in the prophethood of Muhammad as narrated by Abu Hurayrah in Sahih Muslim:

The Messenger of Allah ...observed: "...he who amongst the community of Jews or Christians hears about me, but does not affirm his belief in that with which I have been sent and dies in this state (of disbelief), he shall be but one of the denizens of Hell-Fire"). It is intellectually dishonest to suggest that we could have a mishmash of the two faiths.

Secondly, there is debate - such as happens between figures like the Evangelical Christian preacher/apologist Jay Smith or the Canadian Muslim Shabbir Ally. Both in the Qur'an

and the New Testament we can see grounds for this, and such events can be both informative and even entertaining! If the aim is to demonstrate the relative truth of either religion, this is most appropriate.

A middle ground is the third possibility - Meetings for Better Understanding, whereby a Muslim and Christian speaker without debating present their respective positions on a subject - e.g. Jesus, war, salvation, etc. These meetings are much less confrontational than debates and do help clear up misunderstandings.

The Fourth option involves encounters aiming at improving relations between the communities at a social level, especially at times of communal tension, such as church bombings in Iraq or Pakistan, or inflammatory comments by some (usually American) Evangelical leader. I think there is a place for the last three options.

Unfortunately, the third and fourth are rather underused.

It should also be noted that Christianity and Islam do have more in common with each other than with other faiths. We both believe that Jesus was the Messiah, virgin-born, that he is now in Paradise, that he will come again, etc. However, there are crucial differences that must be acknowledged. This often causes confusion. Of course, among the major differences is the Christian belief in the deity of Christ.

Does the West understand Islam better post 9/11?

I wish this was so! There are stories of more Westerners buying the Qur'an, or visiting mosques, but this remains a small minority. The only 'significant' (if that is the right word) advance in knowledge of Islam that I have detected is that most people know that martyr-bombers are expecting seventy-two Salma Hayek-like voluptuous virgins for their pleasure in Paradise! Few even realise that the bombers expect salvation for seventy relatives.

It is easy to blame Westerners, but we must remember that we live in a secular society, where the main place of worship at the weekend is the local soccer stadium or the pub. Frankly, I blame Muslims - especially leaders - for not being more forthright. Too many started saying after 9/11 that the true jihad was the inward, 'greater' jihad against the nafs (self) whereas the military jihad was the 'lesser' jihad. To me, as a scholar of Islamics, this is nonsense. Hassan al-Banna warned that the narration upon which this is based is not canonical, let alone sahih (sound). It smacks of dishonesty, and thus is self-defeating.

What is needed is for Muslims to explain the difference between defensive and offensive jihad, especially since Bush and Blair both claim

they are fighting the latter. I often address this when invited to speak in churches or to the media, and there is always surprise and then understanding when I explain the distinction. What is more, Muslims have failed to explain what lay behind the events of 9/11 - ultimately, the 1916 Sykes-Picot agreement, the Balfour Declaration, the 1953 overthrow of Premier Mossadeq in Iran, the undiluted US support for its Israeli ally, the US presence in Saudi Arabia, the carnage in Iraq. Again, when I explain this, people are intellectually illuminated.

However, all they hear from Muslim leaders is that 'Islam is a religion of peace'. Westerners look at the corpses from 9/11 (and 3/11, and 7/7) and make their own judgments - which are always negative, not least about the honesty of Muslim spokesmen. Instead, they listen to hostile elements. It's no use blaming Islamophobia; Muslims need to look at their own shortcomings too.

It's the same about the hijab. Don't go blaming westerners for their ignorance about its significance, misconstruing it as a 'symbol of subjugation' rather than 'a religious requirement for modesty'. I have yet to hear this adequately expressed by Muslim representatives. Again, in my comments in churches and to the media, I have always noted that people are surprised to learn this fact - which must mean that Muslim spokespeople are not getting the message across.

Is there something about religion that makes it both part of the problem and part of the solution?

On the contrary, there is something in modern Western society that is the problem. We live with the legacy of 1960s permissiveness, where respect for institutions has collapsed in the moral free-fall. Anything is seen as game for attack. I'm an ardent royalist, and it distresses me to see lazy journalists who make it their mission to rubbish the Royal Family. Or 'sitcoms', lauding immorality and perversion.

However, as an Evangelical Christian, I take comfort in what we call revivals. This is where God the Holy Spirit supernaturally converts multitudes, and this also affects wider society. For example, 18th century Britain was an immoral place, but the Evangelical Revival not only led to many miraculous conversions, but also the social attitude of righteousness we call Victorianism. In the meantime, perhaps both Evangelicals and Muslims in Britain could learn from US Evangelicals, who have constituted themselves as an impressive political lobby - to the point where abortion in one state has been effectively undermined.

In seeking the common ground between civilizations, how can we go beyond the bipolarity of Islam and the West and focus more on the logic of the relationship? What are the comparative frameworks for dialogue today?

In general, I reject the concept of the 'Clash of Civilisations'. I think the late Khurram Murad, Director of the Islamic Foundation, got it right when he stated in *Da'wah among Non-Muslims in the West*, p. 21, that

'...the West has exploited and oppressed the Muslims. Muslims, therefore, have genuine reasons to condemn the West for its hostility and enmity towards Muslims and Islam in history, as in the contemporary world.' What we experience now is a clash of Power, an anti-colonial struggle, similar to the Algerian independence struggle and using methods as immoral as those employed by the FLN between 1954 and 1962 - bombing civilians, etc. The West, especially America, wants to dominate the Muslim world; Muslims want their freedom. A civilisational dialogue must involve Muslims pressing this fact on the ears of Westerners. Perhaps the efforts of Alaistair Crooke is an indication of how this should work, or the call of the Iranian President for a conference between Islamic and European intellectuals on this issue.

On the other hand, Murad noted immediately after making the former comment: 'Though the Western perceptions of Muslim domination, too say in Sicily or Eastern Europe are not very pleasant.' That is an understatement. Whenever Muslims start talking about 'the Khilafah', knowledgeable Westerners think of the Ottoman Caliphate, which was always seen by Europeans as terrible, oppressive enemy. Even today, many Muslim states are lacking in both civil and religious liberty. The Christian media in the West is full of horror stories about the mistreatment of Christian minorities in Islamic countries. Yet Western Muslims often take finance from Gulf princes to build exquisite mosques opened by officials who represent countries devoid of civil and religious liberty. This is a major blunder by Western Muslims. Indeed, as a

minority themselves often facing discrimination, Western Muslims should be the most sensitive community as to the rights of Christian minorities in the Muslim world.

Happily, the writings of Western-based intellectuals such as Dr. Azzam Tamimi, Rashid el-Ghannouchi, and Prof. Tariq Ramadan are raising the prospect of showing how Islam can be compatible with democracy in all its facets, and this needs greater attention by both Muslim and Western commentators.

Moreover, the anti-war rallies in 2003 surely demonstrated great compassion for Iraqis and Palestinians among Westerners. These rallies did more for 'civilisational cohesion' than a multitude of conferences! Sadly, British Muslim leaders squandered this goodwill by urging Muslims to vote Labour despite Iraq in order to get a Religious Incitement Act - which gave non-Muslims the impression that they were more concerned with restricting our freedom than with gaining freedom for the Iraqis and Palestinians. I really think Muslim leaders - especially in Blackburn - should repent of this. It is interesting that even Abu Hamza's group expressed appreciation for the mass non-Muslim turnout at these rallies.

Perhaps the way forward is threefold; Meetings for Better Understanding, such as I outlined before, at local level, between local mosques and local Evangelical churches. Secondly, conferences on civilisational dialogue, looking at minority rights in both civilisational contexts. Finally, Muslim leaders in the West need to embark on a sustained, mass lobby aimed at liberating the Iraqis and Palestinians. This will attract popular support, which will do more to undermine hostile attitudes than any Act of Parliament.

Dr Anthony McRoy is a lecturer in Islamic studies at the Evangelical Theological College in Wales. A Born-again Christian and married with three children, McRoy is an expert on Islam in the UK. He is the author of *From Rushdie to 7/7: The Radicalisation of British Islam*, available from The Social Affairs Unit.

Events

Southeast Asia at the Crossroads

Speaker: Anwar Ibrahim, Former Deputy Prime Minister, Malaysia on 29 March '06 at 5-9pm
Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre, SOAS, University of London
Contact: Jane Savory on 020 7898 4892 or email js64@soas.ac.uk

Ron Geaves inaugural lecture:

"Twenty-five years of fieldwork: Reflections on 'reflexivity' in the Study of British Muslims"

30 March '06 at 7pm
Beswick Lecture Theatre 002, University of Chester
free admission, tickets available from l.baguley@chester.ac.uk

Mosque and Palace: Islamic Treasures of the Middle East from the V&A

14 Jan - 17 Apr '06
Sheffield. Adults £4, concessions £3, child £2, Friends FREE, Family Pass (unlimited visits) £10.
Contact: The Millennium Galleries <http://www.sheffieldgalleries.org.uk/shared/display.asp?ID=507>

1001 Inventions: Discover the Muslim Heritage in our World (UK TOUR)

Museum of Science & Industry in Manchester. Mar 8 - Jun 4 '06
Contact the Foundation of Science Technology and Civilisation at info@fstc.co.uk or www.muslimheritage.com

A Day With Muhammad Symposium

Speakers: Barnaby Rogerson, Dr Jamal Badawi, Muhammad Habibur-Rahman, Sarah Joseph, Sir Iqbal Sacranie & Yusuf Islam
6 Apr '06 at 12:30-6pm
London Muslim Centre
(by invitation only). Contact media@islamicforumurope.com
T 020 7650 3007

The Renaissance and the Ottoman World

26-27 Apr '06
Warburg Institute & SOAS, London.
£50 for two days (concs. £30); £30 for one day (concs. £20).
Contact: Claire Norton at: nortonc@smuc.ac.uk

Developing Countries and International Politics: Between Sovereignty and Global Governance

Speaker: David Williams, University of Oxford
Date: 17 May '06 Time: 7pm
Contact: Prof. David Chandler at d.chandler@wmin.ac.uk

Islam Expo - Promoting Dialogue and Understanding

Speakers: Prof. John Esposito, Jamal Badawi, Tariq Ramadan, Prof. Humayun Ansari, Dr Emile Savage-Smith, Anas Altikriti, and others. 6-9 July '06
Place: Alexandra Palace, London
Contact: 0845 108 5101
info@islamexpo.com or www.islamexpo.com

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The views expressed in the Arches are those of the individual authors and should not be taken to represent a corporate view of The Cordoba Foundation.

Letters to the editor and brief submission of articles in the broad topic of dialogue between civilisations and cultures are welcome.

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