

# Churchman

## EDITORIAL I

Few events in recent times have had more shattering consequences than the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September, 2001. The simultaneous attack on the Pentagon in Washington, though less spectacular, was perhaps even more significant, because it showed that the headquarters of the greatest military power the world has ever seen could be damaged by an unidentified and almost unidentifiable enemy in broad daylight. People compared it to the surprise attack on Pearl Harbour in 1941, though many of the commentators seem to have missed the most telling part of that analogy. In December 1941 most of the world had been at war for more than two years, and Hitler's armies were at the gates of Moscow. The United States was burying its head in the sand, hoping that somehow it could stay out of what seemed to be an alien conflict. In 2001, most countries in the world had been fighting terrorism not for two but for twenty, and even thirty years, but again the United States had generally thought that it was somebody else's fight. Even with respect to the United Kingdom, now being hailed as 'America's staunchest ally', that country had been tolerating Irish-American fundraisers, many of them in New York, who had been bankrolling terrorism in this country, albeit on a much smaller scale.

The end of American innocence was swift, but we must ask ourselves whether it could have come about in any other way. Paradoxically, the biggest kid on the block is also the hardest one to find when he is needed, and it seems that only a major tragedy is capable of stirring him into taking the necessary action. In 1941 (and arguably also in 1917) a war fought without American power was ending in stalemate, with neither side able to crush the other in a decisive way. In 2001 the hope of many is that the sudden entry of America into the war against terrorism will swing the balance and make final victory possible, though nobody is pretending that today's enemy is as obvious a target as Germany and Japan were then. But the biggest difference between 1941 and 2001 lies elsewhere. Then, there was no doubt that the war was being fought to preserve 'Christian civilisation', even though Winston Churchill (who used the phrase often) was not entirely clear as to what that really meant. Christian values may have been honoured more in the breach, at least among the political élite, but honoured they most certainly were. Even in victory, the conduct of the Western allies towards their former enemies was a model of Christian behaviour, and today Germany and Japan are grateful allies, not resentful foes.

But in the years since 1941, the 'Christian character' of the West has been dealt a number of body blows. It is probably true to say that the average person's opinions have not changed all that much. Sixty years ago, America was a church-going nation and Britain was not, and the same holds true today, even if actual numbers have dropped considerably. What has changed more obviously is the way in which Christianity and religion in general are treated in the public sphere. All Western democracies have become 'multicultural', which in practice means that exaggerated deference is paid to minority views at the expense of the traditionally Christian culture of the majority. The Christian voice has been silenced, not by popular vote, but by a form of social engineering which has scared the rulers of our countries into accepting a new mythology based on something called 'tolerance', an elastic concept which is assumed to be a good in itself.

Modern, politically correct 'tolerance' is a creed which validates a wide range of practices, not a few of which Christians regard as undesirable at best and immoral at worst, but which also makes it virtually impossible to preach the Gospel, because to try to convert someone to Christ is widely regarded as 'intolerant'. In fairness, it must be said that the doctrine of 'tolerance' is often unfavourable to other religions as well. We see this in Britain, where the recent growth in religious schools has attracted the ire of the 'tolerant' because they see such places as breeding-grounds of the most intolerant fundamentalism. They may have real grounds for worry in the case of the small number of Islamic schools which have been approved, but of course it is the Church of England which will be hardest hit by this line of attack, even though it is almost impossible to imagine what an Anglican fundamentalist would look like. But 'tolerance' does not allow for discrimination, and so a Church of England school gets tarred with the same brush as a Muslim one, because both are 'religious' and therefore equally dangerous. The content of the 'religion' and the way it is communicated are irrelevant in 'tolerant' terms.

This unwillingness or inability to discriminate between religions is especially worrying in the present climate, because so much of what lies behind the current wave of terrorism is religious in origin. At the heart of it all lies the state of Israel, without which the conflict between the Muslim world and the West, if it existed at all, would look very different. However secular Israel may be in some ways, it cannot be denied that it is a fundamentally religious state, which discriminates in favour of Jews. To the generation which

experienced the holocaust this seems like a small price to pay for Jewish survival, but the Palestinians can hardly be blamed for wondering why they should be the ones who are forced to pay it. The injustices which they have had to suffer may have been inflicted by the Israelis, but behind them lies the guilty conscience of the pseudo-Christian West, and the Arab world knows that only too well.

Many Palestinians are Christians, and some, like Hanan Ashrawi, the spokeswoman for the Palestine Liberation Organisation, are Anglicans. They are particularly prominent in intellectual circles, thanks to the Christian missionary drive for education in the Middle East which dates from the nineteenth century. But although they generally support the Arab cause, they are exposed to the potential hostility of the Muslim majority, which sees them as a foreign element in their midst. It is perfectly possible that, without Israel, an independent Palestine would have become another Lebanon, where thanks to terrorism, the Christian population has been dramatically reduced in recent years, and is now a minority in that country.

That in itself is a reminder that Islam presents by far the greatest danger to peace in the modern world. Liberal commentators in the West have been at pains to point out that most Muslims are peace-loving individuals who are horrified by what has been done in the name of their faith, and they are undoubtedly right about that. But it has to be remembered that Islamic societies are susceptible to pressures from extremist minorities in a way that others are not. One of the reasons for this is that Islam has no institutional structure comparable to the Christian church. There is no body of official doctrine, and no community of theologians to debate controversial ideas in a responsible way. Conversely, there is no such thing as a Muslim 'laity' among whom a genuine secularism might take root. The Koran is a hard book to interpret at the best of times, and critical study of it is almost non-existent. Even fairly moderate mullahs have to resort to allegory or worse to get anything useful out of it, and this makes it almost impossible for them to counter the fundamentalists effectively. Anyone with a good voice and a persuasive manner can rally the troops, and there is not much that any 'authorities' can do about it.

Furthermore, there can be no doubt that Islam is a warrior religion in a way that the others are not. Much is made of the evil of the Crusades, and there

are even some well-meaning (but deeply misguided) Christians who think that we ought to apologise to Muslims for them. But in theological terms, at least, the Crusades were an aberration without any justification in Scripture or in most of the history of the church. In fact, the idea of crusading probably came from the Muslims, as a counterpart to the 'holy war' (*jihad*) which is such an important part of their ideology. Islam basically divides the world into two – the *dar-al-islam* ('house of peace') and the *dar-al-harb* ('house of war'). The Muslim community constitutes the 'house of peace' and this is why Muslims can claim that theirs is a religion of peace, even while they are waging war on everyone else. What Christians call the 'mission field' is for Muslims the 'house of war', and whatever some Muslims may think or say, their conflict is by no means exclusively spiritual. Just compare the origins of Christianity with those of Islam, and the difference becomes patently obvious. A hundred years after Jesus' death, Christianity was still a struggling minority faith in the Roman Empire, where 'spiritual warfare' meant martyrdom in the face of persecution, whereas a hundred years after Muhammad's demise, Islam had conquered almost all of what is now the Arab world and was busily dragooning millions into its fold.

Individual Muslims may be non-violent, but non-violence is certainly not intrinsic to Islam in the way that it is to Christianity. When Osama bin Laden claims to be fighting for Islam, there may be many Muslims who disagree with him, but he is tapping into an Islamic tradition which has far more legitimacy than any 'Christian' warrior of his type could claim. All religions believe that they are right and that others are inferior, but Christians must realise that Islam is the only world religion which has specifically rejected Christianity right from the start. Muhammad knew some Christians and he regarded their theology as blasphemous, even though he was prepared to grant them a certain subordinate status as a 'people of the book'. It is possible to be a faithful Christian without stopping to consider the merits of Islam, but no loyal Muslim can be indifferent to Christianity, because both the teaching of the Koran and the inner logic of his faith forbid this. Islam is intended to replace Christianity, which it regards as defective in much the same way as Christians think of Judaism as an incomplete revelation. This replacement will not just mean a new set of theological dogmas, but a complete change of culture which will replace the decadence of the West with the virtues of an 'Islamic republic'.

Unfortunately, liberal Western states are ill-equipped to deal with this threat to their existence. They do not understand the fundamental importance of spiritual values to the health of a society, and regard spirituality as a kind of hobby. Whether one goes to church on Sunday or plays golf is immaterial, as long as no-one else is pressed into following suit. The liberal state is pragmatic – if a majority of the population wants legalised abortion on demand, then it must be right to provide it, regardless of the wider consequences. It gains acceptance by permitting most things which are done between consenting adults in private, including prayer, as long as they remain just that – private. Islamists, of course, do not see things that way at all. To them, spiritual values are everything, and religious practice must be public – sometimes very public. The long arm of the *shari'a* law reaches into every area of life, including things which most of us would regard as 'private'. Dissent does exist in Muslim societies, of course, but it is against the spirit of the *dar-al-islam* and so is treated with suspicion, if not with open hostility.

Even in a secular state like Turkey, Islam is all but universally accepted, and it may well be that acceptance which allows the state to be 'secular' in the first place. When secularism became the law there in 1923, Turkey was about eighty percent Muslim. Today that figure has gone up to 99.997% and it is still rising, as minorities continue to get squeezed out, despite their insignificance. It may be hard to believe, but every ethnic Turkish Christian could be seated in a single medium-sized parish church, with room to spare, and that in a country where there are officially no barriers placed on any religion. But go somewhere in the Muslim world where there is an active, evangelizing church (Nigeria, Sudan, Malaysia and Indonesia spring to mind) and there is almost invariably some kind of conflict and/or persecution of Christians going on. Yet the liberal West turns a blind eye to that, not to mention the religious restrictions placed on Christian foreigners (there are no Christian natives) in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. Sometimes we are even told that we must be 'tolerant' of their customs, such as the mistreatment of women and the enslavement of Christians (in Sudan), if only because we have no right to interfere in the domestic affairs of another country.

Yet while all this is going on in their homelands, Muslims are taking advantage of Western 'tolerance' and 'multi-culturalism' to gain a hearing for their views. The Islamic bookshop in Charing Cross Road in London even sells books in which leading church figures are quoted denying their own faith

(another form of ‘tolerance’ on their part), but those same church leaders would be indignant if Islam were to be caricatured in that way – something which no Muslim leader would ever do, of course. If this trend continues, one day we shall wake up to discover that the majority of religious worshippers in Britain and elsewhere are Muslims, poised to take control of a society whose own religious leaders have committed spiritual suicide in the name of ‘tolerance’ and ‘understanding’.

In the face of such a threat, the Church of England has a duty to stand up for the faith which it officially professes. Individual freedom of thought must of course be respected, but representative church leaders (like bishops) should be expected to be orthodox believers, and those who are not should be removed from office, however ‘intolerant’ that may seem. Church schools and official publications should teach Christianity without apologising for it. Above all, preachers in pulpits up and down the land should be preaching the immortal words of that most ‘intolerant’ of religious leaders, who dared to say: ‘I am the way, the truth and the life; no-one comes to the Father, but by me.’ There is only one way to salvation, and that is in and through Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Lord of the church.

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