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*David Harold-Barry*

## Islam Comes to Ireland

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Few of us, I suppose, who read these pages have had much contact with Islam. Although I live in Africa, I can think of only two occasions when I ‘connected’ with Muslims. One was when I was visiting the l’Arche community in Bouake, the second city of Ivory Coast, and I was taken to meet their Muslim neighbours. I forget the details – it was 25 years ago – but what remained with me was the warm and genuine welcome. It was like going to any neighbour’s house and we sat down and had coffee. In a moment all my prejudices vanished and I was just with the people next door.

Twenty years later my brother took me to Turkey for my jubilee and we visited Ephesus and Pergamon and read our *Acts of the Apostles*. Mehmet was our Muslim guide and he often referred to ‘Mother Mary’, which astonished me. He was not putting on a show for a bunch of Irish tourists. He was genuine. And when we reached the ruined church of Mary at Ephesus where the Council took place in 431 – a Council that officially called her the Mother of God – I asked him if we could celebrate the Eucharist there. He told me it was against the rules, but he would see what he could do. We had Mass. These two experiences come to mind when I reflect on ‘Islam’ and the emotions that word arouses today. The media tell us of the Islamic State and the violent attacks by Muslims in Africa, Asia, America and Europe. Clearly this is one of the issues of our time and its ripples have reached Irish shores.

There were 49,000 Muslims in Ireland according to the 2011 census, close to 2% of the population. Links with Islam go back to the famine when the Ottoman Sultan sent food aid that was secretly landed in Drogheda, which, incidentally, has a crescent in its crest dating from the time of King John and the age of the Crusades. The first mosque was established in 1976 at 7 Harrington St, Dublin 8, and since then the Muslim population has ‘grown rapidly’<sup>1</sup> and now has 14 Imans in the country, mostly of the Sunni tradition but there is at least one Shia.

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1 Wikipedia, Islam in Ireland

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David Harold-Barry is a Jesuit priest. He lives in Xavier House, Airport Road, PO Box 310085, Lusaka, Zambia. Email: davidharoldbarry@hotmail.com

What are we to make of this 1400 year old giant that occasionally rouses itself to send shudders through the world? Is our first response fear so that we build walls to keep it out? Or are we called to engage with it, understand its origins and history and fiery outbursts? And then, maybe, ask what it means for us today?

ISLAM: A THEOCRACY

I write on a day when the gospel reads, 'without warning a storm broke over the lake.' Islam must have seemed like that to the Christian world of the Eastern Mediterranean in the middle years of the seventh century. The devout Muslim would see it differently: it was the culmination of the revelation God handed to us through his servant Mohammad. The Christians of late antiquity were used to deviations from orthodoxy. Whenever they tried to define their teaching more precisely – at Nicea, Ephesus and Chalcedon – there were always some who dissented. But they knew that dissent died out after a while. The followers of Arius, for example, flourished for a time and then vanished into the history books. The leaders of the Eastern Church expected the same would happen to the followers of Mohammad.

But Islam was different. It was no flash in the pan heresy. It claimed a coherent integrity of its own. As with Judaism and Christianity it had scriptures. Like the Jews and Christians it claimed descent from Abraham and, like Christians, it claimed to be the fulfilment of what had gone before. But, unlike them it backed up its message with the sword. Where Christianity endured three hundred years of persecution in its beginnings, Islam had three hundred years of political as well as religious success. Its leader was both prophet and king in a very different way from Jesus of Nazareth. In Christian history there was always tension between pope or patriarch and emperor or king. In the modern age the separation between church and state is accepted virtually everywhere.

But no such separation has ever been accepted in the Muslim world even though it has been tried, for example, in Egypt and Turkey. Kemal Ataturk, the strong man who emerged in Turkey after the First World War, set up a secular state where Islam was accepted as the dominant religion but it did not dictate the political agenda, such as happens in Saudi Arabia and Iran today. Ataturk set the tone for a tolerant state where Christians would be free to practise their faith. He even insisted that Hagia Sophia, the Christian basilica built by Justinian in 537 in Constantinople, which the victorious Muslims turned into a mosque in 1453 when they took the city, cease being a mosque and become a neutral part of the Turkish heritage; a museum. The fifteenth century

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whitewash was removed to reveal the Byzantine mosaics and the visitor today sees them side by side with placards of the sayings of the prophet. Turkey's tolerance is under strain today but it is still official policy.

In Egypt, we are aware of the tragic denouement of the Nasser/Sadat/Mubarak regime. The Tahrir Square demonstrations of 2012 were supposed to inaugurate a new age of tolerance and democracy. But Muslims pushed their way into the space opened up and provoked a reaction that is still playing itself out in tortuous confrontation. We are back to the *status quo ante*. Egypt is now a grim place, a nation divided by seething emotions, as deeply held theocratic ideals confront the democratic culture of the West.

### A DIVERGENCE OF CULTURES: ISLAM AND THE WEST

These are two examples of the fragile search for cohabitation between Islam and democracy. To the outsider it seems that Muslims struggle with the culture of what – as a short cut – we call 'the West.' This 'west' also includes some countries in the east, such as Japan and Singapore! Muslims have never had the sort of Reformation Christians had in the sixteenth century where adherents of the same faith split and fought bitter wars against each other and then learned to live with one another – first of all in tolerance and, more recently, in warmth.

Islam had a reform of its own in the early Sunni/Shiite schism but this never mellowed into reconciliation. The Shiites were influenced by the Persian culture into which Islam was born while the Sunnis were more at home in Arab culture which they proceeded to adapt to their beliefs. The two branches of the same faith never warmed to each other and are at odds to this day.

Further, Islam has never had an 'age of enlightenment' and 'an age of revolution' such as tore asunder the established order of faith and autocracy in the west. Painfully and slowly the Christian churches came to accept these movements as part of humanity's progress, and faith came to learn from science. No such process seems to have occurred in Islam. The French Revolution proclaimed the rights of men and women. Equality among all triumphed, at least in the consciousness of the West. Nothing like this happened in Islam.

In 2001, shortly after the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York which caused 7000 deaths, there was a great deal of heart-searching about the motivation of the bombers. Scott Thomas, a lecturer in International Relations at Bath University, identified it as a 'battle of ideas and the struggle for cultural authenticity in the Islamic world.'<sup>2</sup> Economic aid and economic

2 *The Tablet*, 6 October 2001

development, he felt, would never fill the gap left by the loss of this sense of identity. 'The primary issue,' Thomas writes, 'between the West and the Islamic world is the shift in world power since the sixteenth century. At its root is cultural and political resentment ... Westerners believe that if economic development takes place then people in – and from – the Islamic world will become "like us", and then there will be no more threats to global security.' This approach to dealing with the roots of the Islamic fundamentalism, Thomas argues, is just one more expression of liberal imperialism. We need to understand that

Taking religion and culture seriously means recognising that the cosmopolitan values of Western liberalism, rooted in the European enlightenment, may no longer provide an adequate basis for what is becoming a genuinely multicultural international society for the first time in history.<sup>3</sup>

In the West we think we have got it right with our culture of democracy and human rights. We believe that everyone else should see things as we see them. But they don't. And they find us unbearably arrogant. Islamic fundamentalism is an expression of rage against a culture that is perceived as wanting to destroy Islamic identity. No amount of material advancement will remove this perception or lead to guns being turned into ploughshares.

#### INTERRELIGIOUS LEARNING

If I appear to be making a string of judgements I hope it is clear that I do it to provoke understanding, not hostility. We have had quite enough of the latter. And besides, everything has to be qualified. Islam did have its enlightenment in that it studied the Greek philosophers, particularly Aristotle, and brought the ancient texts to the west via Spain. And this in turn had a profound effect in the universities and the development of scholasticism with its results of weal and woe. We also learned our algebra and way of writing numbers from Islam. But none of these cultural advances opened the way to greater human freedom in the sense defined by the growth of democracy and the rights of men and women.

So Islam, this huge movement of faith which bestraddles the world, is misunderstood by, and in its turn misunderstands, the West. Why were our ancestors so wrong when they thought it was just a new deviation from orthodoxy that would soon wither, as Gamaliel said Christianity would if it was not 'from God'? (Acts 5:39). For some mysterious reason, which Christians will perhaps never understand, God called Islam into being and sustained it

3 Loc. cit.

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over fourteen hundred years. It is the only distinct faith that has emerged since the dawn of Christianity that shares traces of our beliefs – Abraham, Jesus and Mary are all mentioned in the Qur'an – and yet is so distinct from us.

I think the answer to the 'why' question has something to do with pruning. The sixteenth century Reformation, in hindsight, had everything to do with 'pruning the branches.' But despite the bitter divide and centuries of hostility the reformers and the Catholic Church had far more in common than what separated them. With Islam we have little in common. We are so different that even talking to one another has been impossible for 1500 years, though Francis of Assisi tried it in 1219 when he met Sultan Malik al-Kamil in Egypt.

In the fifty years since the Vatican Council many initiatives have taken place in entering into dialogue with other faiths. Those who have tried with Muslims have found them reluctant to engage. It seems that for them there is nothing to discuss. Faced with this seeming blockage Christians have changed their approach from dialogue to learning. Dialogue searches for common ground. Learning is completely open – with no agenda – except to understand.

Take prayer, for example. Christians and Muslims share a common starting point, Abraham, and journey to a common goal, union with God. It cannot be impossible that we pray together without any other agenda but to praise and thank God. There is nothing in the *fatiha*, the Sura that opens the Qur'an and represents the key prayer of Islam, as the 'Our Father' does for Christians, that Christians cannot say<sup>4</sup>:

In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Ever Merciful.

All types of perfect praise belong to Allah alone,

the Lord of all the worlds,

Most Gracious,

Ever Merciful,

Master of the Day of Judgement.

Thee alone do we worship and Thee alone do we implore for help.

Guide us along the straight path –

the path of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy favours,

those who have not incurred Thy displeasure,

and those who have not gone astray.

Another way in which we can 'learn' with Islam is in cooperating in action. Writing thirty five years ago, Victor Mertens SJ, who

4 Jacques Dupuis SJ, *Christianity and the Religions*, DLT, p 247

spent much of his life in the DR Congo, said, ‘dialogue (with Muslims) on purely religious topics will be extremely difficult and extremely rare.’<sup>5</sup> But, he continues, a ‘dialogue in life’ – cooperation in promoting human values and development projects – can be a way forward. This still seems apt today. Like with prayer, we don’t face each other but we stay side by side and face God. And in shared action for justice and development, we work side by side and face outwards towards others. We can immediately see this can be ‘pruning.’ It is easier to work with ‘our own people.’ We understand each other, where we are coming from and where we are going and the way of getting there.

But in working *with* Muslims, none of these can be taken for granted. In our origins we have little in common. We may take time to agree on goals and have serious difficulties about how to reach them. All of this will stretch the Christian heart and take the person ‘where they would rather not go’ (John 21:18). This, ‘emptying’ (Phil 2:7) can surely be called ‘pruning’ and part of God’s agenda for his Church.

We have learned to live with – and indeed welcome – the Lutheran reformation but it took 500 years. Perhaps the time has come for us to welcome, at last, the jolt the Christian world received fourteen hundred years ago with the arrival of Islam. We are in an age where the dominant culture of the West now thinks religion is *passé*. It is over. We do not need it any more. Just at this point, a long established faith screams in our ears; we are here, we are outraged by your talk; religion is central to life and we are so motivated by it we are willing to rage and destroy in its name.

In the West we keep looking at the acts of Islam, what extreme Muslims do. We know, at heart, the media are powerful in forming our opinions. But when they actually form *my* opinion am I awake to it? We are sated with news of the violence of Islam but do we stop to make the needed distinctions? Yes, there are Muslims filled with rage, hate and millennialist enthusiasm. But do we try to see that most Muslims are people of peace, of prayer and of kindness – even if their voices are not heard? We have to go behind the acts of violence to see the motivation of the perpetrators, to see the source of the rage of the few. Why do they do it? It is scarcely enough to say they are offended by the West’s new imperialism. That hardly explains the sustained and varied attacks of the first decade and a half of this century. There is something far deeper. The dominant culture of the West is assailing their very identity.

What makes us so uncomfortable is the rigid resolve of Islam. We are a tolerant, easy-going society. We cannot believe there are

5 Victor Mertens SJ, *La nouvelle vitalité de l’Islam en Afrique Noire et ses implications pastorales*. Aid to the Church in Need, February-May, 1980

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people today who are fired up with religious ideals that challenge us at every turn. Why can't they just be 'like us'? If we could but listen to what they are saying to us we might find ourselves accepting the pruning of the Father. Even if we learn to be kind and welcoming to Muslims in Ireland or elsewhere we will not change them. They will change us. Are we ready for that? We took long enough to let Luther change us. Now it is the turn of Mohammad. We are called to change and yet remain ourselves.

**Unavenged tears.** Said Ivan earnestly: '... Tell me yourself, I challenge your answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature – that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance – and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth' 'No, I wouldn't consent,' said Alyosha softly.

– FYODOR DOSTOEVSKY, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1879-80, Chapter 4.