A Sermon

Preached
in the Chapel

of

ALL SOULS COLLEGE

by

Noel Malcolm

on

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I vividly remember the day when I was first asked to write an editorial. I was on the staff of *The Spectator*, and this task had figured rather vaguely in my job description, so the request did not come as a complete surprise. But it suddenly occurred to me that I had never actually read an editorial – in *The Spectator* or anywhere else. I knew, in general terms, what editorials were. But what sort of thing did they say, and how did they say it? What tone did they adopt? What authorial persona? I had absolutely no idea.

I also vividly remember receiving the e-mail, from the Warden of this College, inviting me, on his and the Chaplain's behalf, to give a sermon. Now, it would be absurd to claim that I had never read, or heard, a sermon. Many years of service, in my youth, as a chorister would count against that. But still, it is rare to hear a sermon given by someone who is neither a minister of religion nor even a religious believer. And my perplexities were not eased by the Warden's suggestion that I should talk about Islam and Christianity – a topic on which I could certainly give a lecture as a historian, or even (having eventually learned the ropes) write an editorial.

Some of the best non-religious sermons I have heard have gone down the path of autobiography and personal reflection. So I hope I may be forgiven for setting off in that direction, to begin with.

As a graduate student, I got into the habit of learning a Balkan language each year and spending part of the summer vacation travelling in the region – especially in areas where there were interesting mountains to walk in, with remote villages where I could stay the night. Bosnia was one of the places, though not the first, that I visited in this way. When, after a few years, I did go there, I was not surprised, at the conscious level, to find Muslim villages; I

did know some history, after all. But I think that for any Western European, the experience of coming down from the high mountain paths in the cool of the evening, in a European country, and finding a little village nestling around a mosque and a pencil-thin minaret (surely one of the most beautiful architectural forms ever devised), would have carried a little *frisson* at the subconscious level. A slight sense of the exotic – or of the alien? Perhaps with the subliminal question, 'what are these people doing here in Europe?' Wasn't their religion 'Asiatic'? Years later, when I got to know Enes Karić, Bosnia's Minister of Education during the last part of the war, an eminent Islamic scholar and the first translator of the entire Koran into Bosnian, he told me that whenever visiting politicians asked him that question, he gave a simple reply: 'Yes, my religion does come from Asia. So does Judaism. So does Christianity.'

But whatever may or may not have been going on in my subconscious mind, my experience of talking to ordinary Bosnian Muslims, and staying in their homes, gave me a sense that was the very opposite of alienness: this was a warm, friendly and familiar world, where I encountered the same strong codes of hospitality, generosity, honour, and so on, that I had found among their Christian neighbours and their counterparts in other Balkan countries. To say that they were in any way less European would have been not only untrue to experience, but also as obviously prejudicial as saying the same thing about a Balkan Jew.

So when, at the beginning of the 1990s, Slobodan Milošević orchestrated his grotesque campaign of paranoia-inducing propaganda against the Bosnian Muslims; when, in 1992, the war began in Bosnia with

premeditated attacks by Serb forces on defenceless Muslim villagers; and when some parts of the British and European media reacted by declaring, in effect, that there must be *something* in what the Serb extremists were saying, I felt deep dismay. Prejudice against these Muslims was backed up by a range of distortions and falsifications of Bosnian history; countering those led me to write a book, and to be drawn into a world of political activism in which many Muslims in this country were also involved. And after that there was Kosovo, and more years of involvement, taking up, at times, all my mental energies.

I don't want to say any more about those years except that, in the Bosnian case, I cannot rid myself of the feeling that double standards were applied. If, anywhere in Europe, a city with a majority-Christian population had been under siege, with random artillery bombardments, by *Muslim* armed forces, I cannot believe that the world would have stood back and watched it happen for more than three years – as it did in the case of Sarajevo. Roughly a year after the end of the Bosnian war, I switched on the television in a foreign hotel room and found myself watching a report (I think it was on a channel called 'Euronews') about the post-war situation. The camera lingered on men in an ordinary village mosque saying their prayers, while the voice-over said: 'the shadow of Islam is falling over Bosnia.' Could one imagine a report on, say, Lithuania after the end of Soviet rule, with a shot of people praying in a Catholic church and the script saying 'the shadow of Christianity is falling over Lithuania'? I could not imagine that.

Milošević and his followers liked to claim that they were defending Christian civilisation from the threat of Islamic extremism. The truth was the opposite. Their own

acts of aggression were committed by them, at least professedly, as Christian extremists – openly supported, indeed, by Patriarch Pavle of the Serbian Orthodox Church. And the consequence was that they radicalised Muslims who had not been radical before. Reading accounts in the newspapers of British and other Muslims convicted of terrorism over the last two decades, I have been struck by how often they said that it was seeing images of the killings of Muslims in Bosnia that first propelled them down that path.

Today, of course, radical Islamism is one of the great problems that confronts the world. There is a mass of serious writing on this by academics and commentators which I could not even try to summarise here. But in a sermon it may be appropriate to say something, however briefly, about the religious aspects of the problem. What should Christians say to a religion which, apparently, requires its adherents to vilify them and even to wage holy war against them?

Over the centuries, Christians have adopted two main lines of approach, in trying to find common ground with Islam. One is purely theological, emphasising the monotheism of both faiths, and explicating the doctrine of the Trinity (which is so off-putting to Muslim theologians) in terms of the philosophical triad of perfect power, love and knowledge that is implicit in the concept of God. For Unitarian Christians, who abandoned the Trinity altogether, Islam could sometimes be seen almost as a model of an austere monotheistic faith that venerated Jesus as a holy man. In 1682 a group of Unitarians in London actually sent a letter to the Moroccan Ambassador, praising Islam and helpfully proposing that they could make some small improvements to it. Earlier that century, a

comparable initiative had come from the opposite direction: a Muslim writer forged a work which, he claimed, was one of the lost Gospels, the Gospel of Barnabas – an apparently pious Christian text in which it is repeatedly made clear that Jesus was only a man. This work circulates widely in the Muslim world; a copy of the Bosnian translation was pressed into my hands by a dervish in Sarajevo many years ago. But none of these theological initiatives from either side has really bridged the gap.

The other approach has been to emphasise a common genealogy. Judaism, Christianity and Islam share the same biblical heritage. They are, we are told, the Abrahamic religions. What this phrase specially refers to is the tradition that whilst Isaac, Abraham's son by his wife Sarah, was the ancestor of the Jews (including, ultimately, Jesus), the symbolic ancestor of the Muslims was Ishmael, Abraham's son by his Egyptian bondservant Hagar. Ishmael was the 'lad' in Genesis chapter 21 to whom, as we have just heard, God promised 'a great nation'. In his recent book *Not in God's Name*, the former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes very sensitively about what he calls the 'sibling rivalry' set up by this story. He cites a rabbinical tradition, according to which Ishmael was not simply expelled and forgotten about: it says that Abraham later went to visit him, and blessed his home. Sacks's vision of two brother religions under one father (or three, if that other addition to the family tree, Christianity, is also included) is offered as a solution to the problem of radical Islam. But sadly it is very hard to see why radical Islamists should regard it as such, not least because the third Sura of the Koran declares that Abraham belongs not to the religion of the Jews or the Christians, but only to Islam.

My own view is that all these attempts to solve the problem theologically are doomed to failure. Radical Islam today has its own dynamic, which is bound up with social and political conditions (and in some cases fuelled by huge amounts of money). But at a deeper level it is wrong, I feel, to think of Islam simply in theological terms, as a matter of holding certain beliefs in one's head. The strongest resistance to radical Islam comes, in places such as Bosnia or Kosovo, from ordinary Muslims for whom Islam is much more a matter of how one lives, of practices and observances, some of them – such as venerating the tombs of holy men – ruled out by the new doctrinal intolerance. In these ways ordinary Islam seems much closer to ordinary Judaism – it is a matter primarily of things one does, and not of propositions one holds in one's head, as the more doctrinalised traditions of Western Christianity might have it.

The only solution to the problem of radical Islamism will come from ordinary Muslims who do not want to be radicalised – not least because that process would eliminate aspects of what, for them, is Islam itself. To the question 'what is proper Islam?', there is only one answer: it is what proper Muslims take it to be. It's rather like asking 'what is good violin playing?', where the answer is: whatever good violinists believe it to be. That may sound like a circular argument, but it is not an empty one, for in these cases we are looking at a set of values and principles that are simply internal to a practice; there is no separate measure outside that practice itself. Concretely, there is no designated authority for Islam – nothing like the Pope and General Councils for Catholicism. And in the abstract, for Islam there really is no external or objective criterion – certainly not that of submitting all questions to a particular kind of

literal reading of the Koran.

So, finally, what remains for Christians, or indeed non-Muslims generally, to do about the problem of radical Islam? I think I can give, at least, a negative answer to that question. It is so important that we should *not* play into the hands of the radicalisers by talking about Islam as if it were, by its very nature, an existential enemy. I despair each time I read ignorant Western commentators (usually conservative journalists) citing one or two verses of the Koran in order to prove, almost triumphantly, that Islam – 'correct' Islam – is inherently violent and intolerant. Islam is what Muslims believe it to be, and it is what they do as Muslims. All of that has changed over time, and it may also vary between different parts of the Islamic world. When foolish Westerners talk of this inherently hostile and violent religion, I think of the Bosnian Muslims I have known, starting with those villagers practising their own entirely authentic form of Islam, and I know that I have never felt myself in safer or more trustworthy hands.

No doubt there are many other things that we or our political leaders could do, however indirectly, to support those Muslims who wish to continue and to develop their own non-radical Islam. But when I eventually admitted to the editor of *The Spectator* that I had no idea how to write an editorial, he did say one very helpful thing. 'Don't think that you have to put forward the solution', he said. 'It's enough just to state the problem, and sketch one or two of the principles that should be borne in mind by anyone trying to solve it.' I think that was excellent advice for a novice editorial-writer – and, perhaps, for a sermoniser too.