

The Impact of September 11th on British Faith Communities

A Christian Perspective with special reference to Muslim-Christian relations by Andrew Wingate

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Introduction

One result of September 11th has been a great interest in Islam, demonstrated by a large increase in sales of the Qur'an and books about Islam. It is shown also by the number of references to Muslims in the British daily press. The increase of articles in the broadsheets is around 250-280% in the year June 20th 2001 until June 19th 2002 (in the London Times, for example, from 535 to 1486). From a much lower base, the increase within the tabloids is even greater, an average of 380% (most dramatically in the British Daily Mirror, from 164 to 920). Much of this is responsible journalism, notably when the Sun newspaper, soon after September 11th, printed in large letters the headline 'Islam is not evil'. Other articles have only added to the Islamophobia identified so clearly in the Runnymede Report, published in 1997. Emphasis on terrorism has only exacerbated the tendencies identified in that report. The analysis in the Muslim Council of Britain press article above, says that the impression given through stereotypes is that Muslims are 'intolerant, misogynistic, violent or cruel, and finally strange or different. They are stern, severe, harsh, puritanical. The last thing you would expect Muslims to do is laugh, enjoy themselves or tell jokes.' A key question is whether, in the light of history, all this concern with Islam, and indeed, with religion in general, will seem like a mere blip, an aberration in the rush towards a world where religion is increasingly irrelevant and secularism reigns supreme. Will September 11th seem like the day we heard of the death of Diana, Princess of Wales incredibly powerful at the time, but seemingly now sunk without a trace? Or have we experienced a real sea change, such that horizons have been permanently widened, and a real watershed crossed?

One result of September 11th has been this apparently greater wish for knowledge, a realisation that ignorance and indifference is itself culpable, and a feeling that the issues raised by that day are not going to go away. But are we deceived in this, will it be like another day of seemingly immense significance at the time, January 1st 2000? The dreams of that night seem now as ephemeral as the fireworks ignited with such excitement throughout the world. Clearly only time will give us an answer.

What is clear, at least for the foreseeable future, is that religion has become a factor in world politics and sadly in local, national and international conflict. This is quite beyond expectation, as we look back to decades of the cold war. Whether it is religion itself, or the use of religion that is responsible is a central question. But certainly conflicts such as those in Kashmir, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Holy Land, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Northern Ireland, Chechnya, the former Yugoslavia, the Philippines have all had a religious flavour, and been surrounded by religious rhetoric. Communism and colonialism are no longer the central factors. This raises the challenge to all religious people, Christians amongst them, as put by the British Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks recently, If religion is

not part of a solution, it will certainly be part of the problem. In similar vein, I heard a speaker on the Radio 4 programme Beyond Belief, say that it used to be said that conflict and war were normally caused by greed or grievance. Recent events had emphasised a third cause- creed.

For this article I will use as a framework the four principles of inter faith dialogue, as affirmed by all the main churches in Britain and which are a shortened version of those of the World Council of Churches. They are in the process of being revised, but they have stood the test of time since the 1980's, and have proved a useful and balanced basis for constructive inter faith relations. They are: dialogue begins when people meet people; dialogue depends on removing misunderstanding and building up trust; dialogue leads to common service in the community; dialogue is a means of authentic witness. How have people responded to September 11th in terms of these principles? I write from my experience as Inter Faith Adviser in Leicester in the UK, and predominantly from the perspective of Muslim-Christian relations, which are so central to the post September 11th scenario.

Dialogue begins when people meet people

A group of Christians in an area with few Muslims responded to September 11th by requesting me to lead a course about Islam. My principle for such courses is that as far as possible Muslims should explain their own faith, while I can offer a Christian response to that. A leading Muslim lay person reflected with them for an evening, and all the questions related to terrorism and Islam were registered. Many were impressed with his openness, others still needed to be convinced. The following week we visited the mosque in a nearby town. I could see the power of personal encounter and dialogue, as we were received with friendship and small groups formed with a Muslim in each, over a meal at the end of our visit. A number of the young men spoke warmly of the non-stipendiary Anglican priest who had taught them biology-excellently- in the local comprehensive school, and had shared his faith. There was a visible impact through Christians witnessing 150 men of all ages praying. Ignorance had previously been enormous, but the readiness to learn very high, in spite of predictable concerns about the place of women in Islam.

Another example is when a Rural Dean (responsible for an area of the Diocese) invited me to bring an Imam to the Deanery Synod church meeting, to be held in a village church. When we arrived, the host priest launched into a fervent prayer the theme of which was that the participants would be protected from compromise or syncretism! The Imam did not react, but spoke of the privilege he felt to be speaking in a Christian church for the first time in his life, and shared his response to September 11th with grace and sensitivity. This was certainly the first time this church had received such a stranger since being built nearly a thousand years ago. The same happened in the Cathedral. At a Lay Congress of about 150 Christians, Muslim and Sikh speakers talked about the relationship between their faith and their life. Some Christians remarked on how a day of engagement with people of other faiths had led to a transformation in their attitudes. Only since September 11th have they been willing to open themselves in this way, and they have surprised themselves. Until then they had refused to tackle such a contentious subject.

At a national level, Muslims have greatly appreciated the way certain Christian leaders have taken the initiative in standing by them when they are being attacked. Rowan Williams' position has been well noted. A Leicester Muslim read the little book on September 11th, *Writing in the Dust*, and remarked that somebody who could write those pages must be the next Archbishop! Another initiative appreciated is a Listening to Muslims' exercise, established by George Carey. A team is visiting six British cities, spending a considerable time listening to the variety of Muslim voices, many less amenable than those I quote in this article, and also listening to Christians living in those cities. People are meeting people, not religions meeting religions, as the variety within each faith is encountered.

Dialogue depends upon removing misunderstanding and building up trust

There have been two reactions to the post September 11th period amongst the Christian community at a local level. On the one hand fear and rejection, on the other a new openness to learn and an ability to distinguish between those who perpetrated the attack on the twin towers, and the vast majority of Muslims living in Britain. This second group has a strong imperative, to discover how we are to live together as citizens, and to understand something of this religion by which an increasing section of our population live. Here is a real opportunity to remove misunderstanding and build trust.

I preached in a church in Hinckley, Leicestershire, on the theme of the Christian relationship with Islam. I reflected biblically, theologically and practically on this theme. This meant witnessing to the demand that for Christians comes from Jesus to love our neighbours of all faiths. This includes our Muslim neighbours of Leicestershire, particularly since September 11th since they are often treated with unfair suspicion. It means witnessing to the distinctiveness of the Christian understanding of Jesus, just as it means listening to Muslim commitment to the faith of the Qur'an. At the end, I went to the porch to shake hands with people in good Anglican fashion. The first person to leave the church refused my hand, and said, 'Why did you not mention the twin towers? There is only one word for Muslims- murderers!' This town has few Muslims and houses the national headquarters of the British National Front, a far right party fifteen miles away only from Leicester where the minority ethnic population is nearing 50%, and the road in which I live is about 80% Muslim. It is a town also where more than a hundred people had held a protest meeting against the arrival of the National Front, led by Christian clergy.

The National Front has quite deliberately changed their tactics in recent months, viciously targeting Muslims, and attempting to win over Hindus and Sikhs to their side. Such Islamophobia remains legal in the UK, since Islam is a religion and not a race, and there is as yet no protection against expressions of religious hatred. Linking Muslims with terrorism has become a cheap way of building up fear and destroying trust between citizens. Such has been reinforced by selective quotations from the Qur'an, most notably on a tape issued to clergy in the Leicester area entitled, 'Islam, a threat to us all, a joint statement by the British National Party, Sikhs and Hindus.' It is encouraging that all members of the Council of Faiths unanimously called successfully

for a ban on a National Front march against Islam in Leicester. There was no division between Muslims, Christians, Hindus or Sikhs in their stance.

In the cause of building up trust, a challenge for Christians in Britain is how to deal with the rhetoric, often couched in Christian terms, coming from the United States. President Bush spoke as recently as June 2nd, to cadets at West Point, 'We are in a conflict between good and evil, and Americans will call evil by its name...and we will lead the world in opposing it.' The war on terrorism has, in the eyes of the President and his supporters, always had a deeply moral and often quasi-religious fervour. The religious veneer has been Christian, bolstered by the increasing power of the Christian religious right. Though the phrase 'crusade' has been dropped, much of the rhetoric has the same feel. In the popular hermeneutic of such phrases, it becomes a war between Christian morally upright nations, and Islamic, morally evil, nations.

Clifford Longley, in his recent book, *Chosen People: the big idea that shapes England and America*, argues that such rhetoric permeated North American Protestant tradition, and before that, English tradition, from the time of the reformation. He quotes Herman Melville, from the nineteenth century, 'We the Americans are the peculiar, chosen people- the Israel of our time; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world...God has predestined great things for our race...long enough we have been sceptics with regards to our selves, and doubted whether indeed the political Messiah had come. But he has come in us.' He shows how a similar language is found in Ronald Reagan, how America is a shining city on a hill, appropriating the biblical language in words that could have come from his later successor George Bush.

It has been pointed out that Bush follows Reagan rather than his father in his approach, and this is an example. From here comes the language of new world order, and axis of evil. It ignores the wise words of Arundhati Roy, 'President Bush can no more rid the world of evil doers that he can stock it with saints.' It lies behind the increasing identification, since September 11th, of American policy with the policy of Ariel Sharon. The old Israel and the new Israel are called to stand together against the forces of Islam. Here the terrorists are represented by the Palestinians and all Arabs who back them. It is conveniently forgotten that there are Palestinian Christians, within this crude polarisation.

From the time of September 11th onwards, Christian leadership in Britain has largely distanced itself from this language, and these concepts. In this we have been greatly helped by far the majority of Muslim leadership, at both national and local level, who have played a key role in moderating the response of their community. Iraq is now to the fore. In Leicester it is as religious communities together, that we have written to the Prime Minister and others, saying that we are determined to stand united in opposing a unilateral attack on that country, and warning that our good community relations between religions will face great strain, as Muslims feel torn between their solidarity with fellow Muslims, and their British citizenship. September 11th has meant that we can no longer opt out of these mega issues. We need to reaffirm a European Christian tradition where liberalism is not a bad word, and where we argue vigorously that phrases such as 'he that is not for us is against us' are simplistic in the extreme. Life is more complicated than that and we have to live with much grey in the world, and this is not necessarily a bad thing.

Moreover there is an urgent imperative to address deeper questions raised by September 11th, and in particular why America and close allies like Britain are so hated by militant groups, and why even moderate Muslims, while condemning utterly what happened on September 11th, feel so disappointed at the failure to address other urgent questions. A conference was held on September 11th 2002, when we remembered and rightly so, those who died a year before, as a result of such evil deeds, and when much of this paper was given. The Muslim speaker, a gentle Imam, said he too joined in the sadness and mourning. But he also asked why no-one seemed to remember the even more and equally innocent who had died from devastating bombing raids in the villages of Afghanistan as a result of so called collateral damage? And what of similar numbers who had now died in Israel/Palestine? Or those who died in Rwanda? Was a life brought to an end in New York so much more valuable than that in Palestine, or Iraq or Africa? Theologically, there can be no doubt or argument, all are made in God's image and are equal in his sight. Politically, the answer seems quite the opposite.

In the 'holy land' the year since September 11th has been a year largely wasted, as the compulsion to concentrate all on the 'War on Terrorism', at the behest of the overwhelming power in the world, has given carte blanche to the Israeli government to thwart even more directly so many UN resolutions of the past, and to tear up the much praised Oslo accords, as Palestine has been repeatedly reoccupied, and its people become victims of a state violence no less brutal than the desperate actions of the suicide bombers against innocent Israeli civilians.

So it is with other problems. The government of the USA either refuses to participate, or fails to address seriously, a whole range of issues which affect the majority of humankind deeply- the environment, AIDS in Africa, justice issues and human rights, the increasing gap between rich and poor that globalisation has certainly not addressed, and many would say has been exacerbated. At the same time, there has been an increasing critique of such injustices and failures to address issues, from the churches on both sides of the Atlantic. In Britain the churches are increasingly distancing themselves from government policies, as they use their historical position to express a series of doubts, as they take up a critical distance from the establishment they have always been identified with. When this happens, they are respected, and find themselves as allies of the responsible Muslim leadership, and indeed of leaders of other faiths.

Muslims have often faced the challenge, particularly since September 11th, are you Muslim first or British first? Why is this question only addressed to Muslims? Should we as Christians not face the same question? Do we not both owe our ultimate allegiance to God, and other obligations are held within that allegiance ('Render unto Caesar...'). One senior Muslim told me he was asked by a reporter, what would he do if the British Parliament passed a law banning Halal meat. He said that he would refuse to obey that law. Why am I not asked, what if the British Parliament passed a law banning the eucharist? Both highly unlikely. But my answer would surely be the same. The experience of the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany shows that such questions are not always hypothetical, as also the South African story, where Christians were

obligated to break all kinds of laws in the apartheid time. But it is Muslims who are put under the microscope repeatedly.

They are also hurt by the accusation that they do not speak up against terrorism. This was Margaret Thatcher's well known interjection post September 11th, that she had not heard enough condemnation of the attack on the Twin Towers 'from Muslim priests(!)' It was repeated by Andrew Carey in the Church of England Newspaper as recently as October 24th 2002, in an article entitled 'Where are the Islamic voices of outrage against terrorism?' Such articles only make it all the more difficult to build up trust at a local level.

The CEN gave me the chance to write an article in reply the following month and this involved me researching the large number of leading international voices who had repeatedly condemned terrorism, and also our local leaders. Two examples: Suleman Nagdi, a leading lay person, a Justice of the Peace recently awarded the MBE by the Queen, remarked, 'The author has obviously failed to attend any of the vigils and prayers, up and down the country, to honour the victims of terrorism. He is reinforcing the Islamophobic attitudes promulgated by some of the mainstream press.' Dr Ataullah Siddiqui, Senior Lecturer in Pluralism at the Markfield Islamic Institute in Leicestershire, condemned equally the crimes that killed those in New York, Christians in Pakistan, and Muslims killed by authoritarian Muslim governments. 'For me these were equally heinous crimes against humanity. Somehow we Muslims seem to be expected to share the guilt for an act of terror committed by someone bearing a Muslim name, in a way that does not happen to the Christian community, or to Buddhists after the subway deaths in Tokyo.'

Building up trust is not easy, and setbacks come. This newspaper won back some trust by their willingness to publish our reply.

Dialogue leads to common service in the community

At a leadership level, there has been an energy not seen before. After September 11th, we began to hold meetings of faith leaders on a weekly basis, convened by the Bishop, and attended also by a senior police representative. At first the agenda was Afghanistan, and we made a decision that an attack on a place of worship of one faith, or insult or injury to a member of that faith would be considered an attack on us all, and that we would maintain solidarity and offer support across faiths. The main likelihood at the time was attacks on Muslims and their mosques, or on Sikhs being mistaken for Muslims. We have continued the forum once every few weeks, and been able to agree statements, published in the press, on Gujarat, Palestine and Iraq. It is the September 11th effect that has enabled these wider discussions.

A common witness for peace took place on September 11th 2002 outside the Town Hall. The Chair of the Federation of Muslim Organisations in Leicestershire, Manzoor Moghal, wrote in the Daily Mail on that day, that in all his years of involvement with race relations, he could not remember such apprehension amongst Muslims as a year before. 'Yet, though sporadic violence and abuse were worrying, the anger against Muslims never materialised on the scale we feared...A state of permanent war

between Muslims and the West is exactly what the terrorists wanted. Therefore putting up barriers between communities would only play into their hands. Thankfully the vast majority of Britons, white, Asian and black, recognised this. So, as the months passed, the anxieties of the Muslims began to recede a state of normality returned.' Condemning absolutely extremist Muslims as vigorously as the National Front, and particularly the Al Muhajiroun-, he added that only a warped mind could think there was anything positive about September 11th.

Since that other recent significant British event, the disturbances in Northern cities of summer 2001, and since September 11th, there has been a strong push towards the involvement of faith communities in local regeneration and in social cohesion policies. No longer are religious communities ignored, and there is a strong pressure from government, from the Prime Minister's office downwards, for us to contribute to such policies. It is up to us to respond. The Christian church, because of its historical position, needs to take a lead- not to assert its own position, but to enable its colleagues from other faiths to join in partnership, in serving the community.

A gathering of about 700 leaders from all faiths at Buckingham Palace in June, and the Queen and future King's active involvement and encouragement for all to contribute across faiths to the future of Britain also represents a sea change over the last few years. Here the establishment recognised common service to the community equally across faiths, and through faiths together.

At a more local level, it was not difficult in Leicester to get support from Muslims and Christians together, for a joint collection in aid of the child victims in Afghanistan through Save the Children. We raised over £6800, and similar efforts have been taken in some other places. This year we have launched a fund for a Christian hospital in Gaza, and a Muslim project in Kosovo, for the period of Ramadan and Advent. The basis for the appeals has been two established dialogue groups, one of them centring on clergy, the other on women.

Dialogue is a means of authentic witness

Theologically, the post September 11th period has given a new impulse towards a practical pluralism. An increasing number of people hold a theological pluralism; God works through different religions, worship and spirituality find many ways of expression. Who is saved is beyond our understanding, and we should concentrate on being faithful Christians, and affirming common values. This involves loving our neighbour as ourselves, and this includes our Muslim, Jewish and Hindu neighbour. The harm that religious rivalry has done to our world is increasingly recognised. Differences between such pluralism, and a Christ centred inclusivism become marginal at a practical level, as we work together for a better world.

At the same time, there are others whose exclusivism has been strengthened as they identify Islam as a religion that is intrinsically bound up with fundamentalism and what they see as extremism. They affirm both a theological and practical exclusivism, as they feel the superiority of Christianity affirmed. What is a fact is that no longer can the question of the theology of religions be ignored. Such was increasingly so in academic theology long before September 11th. It is a question addressed in most recent

systematic theology books. I was on the Church of England Doctrine Commission that produced the report *The Mystery of Salvation* in 1995, and was asked to draft the chapter, *Christ and other faiths* (Ch 7), the first report to make such an agenda central. There is a strong assertion there that 'God can and does work in people of other religions, and indeed within other religions, and that is by his Spirit.' 'There are a plurality of ways by which people are being made whole in the here and now', while at the same time there is a conviction expressed that ultimate salvation will be through Christ, who, as the Logos of God, is the source and goal of salvation, the fullest expression too of the love of God which longs to include and not exclude. How this will happen lies in the mystery of God, a statement that mirrors the Muslim understanding that Allah will save whom he wills, and that the future is not in our hands.

But since September 11th, this area has required comment, from all those addressing central theological issues from a Christian perspective, whether in writing, in preaching or in discussion- where are we in relationship to other faiths? do they contain truth or not? Above all, is what holds us together greater than what divides us?

At another level September 11th posed the same question to all people of religious faith; where was God on that day? Much reflection has taken place from a Christian perspective, tending to centre on the cross and the image of God taking suffering upon himself in Jesus, and sometimes linked symbolically to two huge steel beams which were left hanging in the shape of a cross at Ground Zero. James Martin's book, *Searching for God at Ground Zero*, refers to the sense of resurrection found in the loving charity of rescue workers, and the promise of new life rising from the rubble.

The problem about this kind of language is that it isolates the Twin Towers event, terrible as it was, from all the other suffering seen in these opening years of the millennium. I warm more to the words included in a moving poem inspired by September 11th- *Where was God on September 11th? He was begging in old clothes in the subway beneath the world Trade Centre. He was homeless in Gaza, imprisoned in Afghanistan, starving in Somalia, dying of Aids in an Angolan slum, suffering everywhere in this fast-shrinking world, and boarding a plane unwittingly in Boston, heading for an appointment on the 110th floor.* The poem goes on to speak of such devastation that we could never dream of, and then ends with the words *We line up our weapons up: faith, hope, obedience, prayer forgiveness, justice: the explosive power of God.* These, for Christians, are shown in the life and death of Jesus, as he faced up to evil. They are the common values of all our religions, as illustrated in the best of our common responses to September 11th.

Conclusion

I have a large file of cuttings and internet articles, entitled 'Crisis onwards.' One of the articles, is by John Paul Lederach, entitled *The Challenge of Terror*. It is sub-titled *A Travelling Essay*, since he is much travelled in the pursuit of conflict resolution. He ends:

We will not win this struggle for justice, peace and human dignity with the traditional weapons of war. We need to change the game again. Let us take up the practical challenges of this reality perhaps best described in *The Cure of Troy*, an epic poem by

Seamus Heaney, no foreigner to the grip of cycles of terror. Let us give birth to the unexpected.

So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a farther shore
Is reachable from here.

Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

As adherents of various faiths, that change we can only achieve together, not apart. Here we can note the pragmatism of Richard Chartres, Bishop of London, 'Christians will not make their proper contribution to the struggle that is in progress unless they are robust about their own faith and convictions. But they also need to be urgent about finding allies in other faith communities for a common defence of the values and laws which make civilised co-existence possible.' (from *The Times*, 14.9.2001). These include those who follow a religion of the book, but also Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and others. We all have our extremists, we need each other to have the strength to face them down, so that religion can indeed be, as Jonathon Sacks said above, part of the solution and not part of the problem of this first century of the new millennium.

I end with a remarkable story found in *The Quest for Sanity* .

It tells the story of a young Pakistani Muslim caught up in the Twin Towers horror. A massive cloud of debris approaches him in the darkness of the dust storm. He fell on his back in terror. He was wearing a pendant inscribed with an Arabic prayer for safety, 'similar to a cross.' 'A Hasidic Jewish man came up to me and held the pendant in his hand, and looked at it. He read the Arabic out loud of a second. What he said next I will never forget. With a deep Brooklyn accent he said, "Brother, if you don't mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us, grab my hand, let's get the hell out of here." He helped me stand up, and we ran like forever without looking back. He was the last person I would ever have thought would help me. If it weren't for him, I would probably have been engulfed in shattered glass and debris.'.... He ends the article with a plea, 'I too am a Muslim, and I too have been victimised by this awful tragedy. The next time you feel angry about this, and perhaps want to retaliate in your own way, please remember these words, "Brother, if you don't mind, there is a cloud of glass coming at us, grab my hand, let's get the hell out of here.'

Andrew is Canon Theologian, Director of Ministry, and Inter Faith Adviser in the Diocese of Leicester.

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