



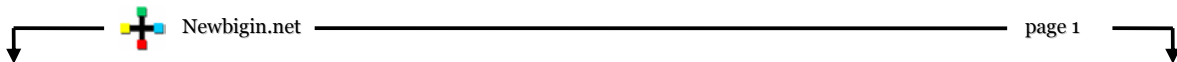
Muslims, Christians and Public Doctrine

(90mcpd)

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Public debate has been sparked by the issue of a Muslim Manifesto by the London based Muslim Institute, advocating Muslim resistance to assimilation into British culture and insisting that Muslims must retain their distinct cultural and social identity. Muslims, in other words, must remain a separate community in Britain. This view is not, of course, shared by all Muslims in Britain, but its plausibility for Muslims is strengthened by the British reaction (or lack of reaction) to The Satanic Verses. The response of Clifford Longley in the *The Times* is probably representative of most British opinion. He advises Muslims to follow the example of previous immigrant communities. Let them remain faithful to their religion but in all other respects let them be like other British citizens. Assimilation in all except religion is the only way for them.

This typically British response asks Muslims to follow our example in separating private belief from public doctrine. In my discussions with fellow-Christians I find that the phrase 'public doctrine' raises hackles. Surely, it will be said, we do not have a public doctrine. Everyone is free to think as he or she wishes. We all agree, do we not, that the important thing is to develop the critical faculties so that every one learns to think for herself and to have the courage to question all dogma. But it does not require much exercise of the critical faculty to see that this programme is self-defeating. The dogma that all dogma must be open to question must itself be open to question. The attempt to follow this route must lead either to the reign of unacknowledged dogma or else to vacuity and nihilism. But it is this dogma which Muslims are being invited to accept as the means of assimilation into British society.

I have recently read a paper (so far unpublished) by the mathematician John Puddefoot in which he explores the bearing of the Second Law of Thermodynamics on the doctrine of divine creation and providence. The Second Law states that all closed systems move towards increasing randomness. If this universe is a closed system, then its future can only be descent into chaos. And this is the scenario which science offers. Puddefoot quotes the biochemist P W Atkins as follows: 'We are the children of chaos, and the deep structure of change is decay. At root there is only corruption, and the unstemmable tide of chaos. Gone is purpose: all that is left is direction.'

This is the bleakness we have to accept as we peer deeply and dispassionately into the heart of the Universe” (1). We are part of nature, and if nature is the closed system then the relentless direction of change must always be towards chaos.

In contrast to this scenario, Puddefoot quotes Athanasius: “..... for if, out of the former normal state of non-existence, (men) were called into being by the presence and loving kindness of the Word, it followed naturally that when men were bereft of the knowledge of God, and were turned back to what was not, they should, since they derive their being from God who is, be everlastingly bereft even of being ... and abide in death and corruption, for man is by nature mortal, inasmuch as he is made out what is not” (2). Using the insights of information theory, Puddefoot goes on to show how we can understand that the universe, and ourselves as part of it, are not locked in a closed system headed for chaos, but – being open to the Word which is the source of creation – can live as part of a cosmos which is directed towards the divine purpose.

Here we have two mutually irreconcilable understandings of the human situation. One sees the proper human condition as being one of looking up, open to the creative Word from whom all things have their being; the other sees the human stance as looking down, investigating the created world but oblivious of the source of its being. One is on the way to life, the other to death. And, if I interpret rightly what I have heard Muslim parents saying, it is that their children are being taught in our schools to look down and not to look up, to investigate the causes of things but to ignore the one from whom they come and for whom they are made. Their children are taught the origins of human life in the theory of evolution, and the origins of each individual human being in the programme encoded on the DNA molecule. But they are not taught the purpose of human life, not taught to look up to God as the goal of all human being. I can understand why Muslims do not want to be ‘assimilated’ into this. I wonder why Christians are content to be.

The issue of public doctrine cannot be evaded. It is an evasion to say that we are taught to criticise all dogma for that is merely to state a dogma which has to be criticised. Muslims and Christians share a common belief that life is not to be understood or managed without reference to God. Christians must welcome the challenge which Muslims bring to our belief-system and begin to recognize how much dogma is built into our accepted public doctrine. The situation in which we in Britain now have to answer the questions of the Muslims cannot be answered by the simple word ‘assimilate’. We must face a fundamental question put to our accepted public doctrine. I think this question will become more and more pressing. For the greater part of the 20th Century the main global alternative to Christianity has been Marxism, for Marxism seemed to hold out the promise of creating the kind of world for which Christians pray - a world of justice and freedom. That vision has faded. I think that during the 21st Century the main global alternative to Christianity will be Islam – the Islam to which western civilisation is already so much indebted for its introduction to much of Greek philosophy and to mathematics. Islam will make a powerful bid for the intellectual high ground. One of our great universities is already considering appointing a lecturer in Muslim economics. (A proposal for a chair in Christian economics would have been laughed out of court).

Christianity and Islam have differing beliefs about how God rules in human affairs. The heart of the difference is in the

fact of the cross. The Prophet rode into Mecca to conquer; Jesus rode into Jerusalem to die. The crux lies there. And that means that Christians cannot use coercion in the struggle between two different ultimate faiths. But struggle there must be. The field is the whole of our public doctrine. Those who must take the lead are those whose competence is in the areas of science, literature and the arts, economics, politics and all the learned professions. They must find the courage to face the issues which are raised in these sectors of public life by God’s revelation in Jesus Christ.

This will be a long struggle, and one century will not be enough to show decisive results. But it is a struggle which cannot be evaded. The choice is between the 'bleak', dispassionate' vision of the future to which Atkins invites us, and the hope of new heavens and a new earth to which we are invited in the Gospel.

1. P. W. Atkins, *The Second Law*, Scientific American Library, 1984.
2. Athanasius, *de Incarnatione, IV* tr. A Robertson.

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