

## NEW MARTYRS & OLD TRUTHS

St Edward's path to sainthood was through martyrdom – you will be familiar with the story of him being lured by his step-mother to his death at Corfe Castle. Originally, 'martyr' meant 'witness', but in time Christians came to use the word exclusively to refer to those who witnessed to Christ through their death. Martyrdom is a powerful witness; to give your life for a cause is to give everything, and in its early years martyrs showed that Christianity was literally a faith worth dying for. Indeed, in the third century Tertullian said 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'.

Martyrdom has been given a new twist today by some of the more extreme believers of Islam. Last week we saw in the papers and on the TV the picture of the two British Muslim suicide bombers who said it was an honour to kill for their faith. And the people of Madrid are even now coming to terms with the latest exercise of that 'honour'. This is far removed from the Christian understanding of martyrdom. Some Christians, like Polycarp of Smyrna, may have desired a martyr's death, but that is not the same as deliberately taking one's own life in a religious cause, and at the same time killing indiscriminately many others. Even so, these men (and women) believe that they have something worth dying for, which we find it hard to comprehend, but which, I believe, we ignore at our peril. This is hard for us because of the unspeakable horror of their actions. Their crimes must be punished, but I believe that despite the horror we must also learn from them.

Almost a year ago, David Goldberg, who is a rabbi, wrote a column in *The Independent* that I found very helpful in aiding my understanding. At the end of a series of lectures on Judaism that he gave at a Muslim college for the training of imams, he asked the students where they would prefer to live:

'in a secular Western-style democracy where religion is a private choice, or in a theocratic state governed by the sharia [the Muslim law]? Without exception, they all opted for a sharia state, because, they said, as the revealed will of God the sharia contains legislation not only for minute particulars such as personal hygiene or the times of prayer, but also for every aspect of wise government. Their confidence in the all-embracing efficacy of the sharia highlighted one crucial difference between Western and Islamic notions of the nation state. Broadly speaking, we in the West subscribe to government by secular law and the separation of church and state.....

'Islamic jurisprudence, in contrast, does not endorse secular jurisdiction as a genuine source of law. Instead, it proposes a universal law that is the single path to salvation. The sharia is understood as a fully comprehensive system of commands that applies in both private and civic spheres. It does not regard the state as an independent object of loyalty, or recognise the secular conception of government that Western societies inherited via Roman law and Christianity. If anything, the austere Muslim conception of law as holy law applying to every area of human life involves a repudiation of the Western ideal of secular democracy, with the attendant and inevitable compromises of the political system. Obedience in Islam is owed first to God, and then to those situated in a descending hierarchy of personal loyalties and obligations.'

I found that helpful in understanding the situation in Iraq, and especially why the United States' policy of establishing a Western-style democracy is being resisted. The Islamic view of law is strikingly similar to the Law of Moses set out in the first five books of the Bible, with its emphasis on community, solidarity and justice, and its single divine source. The Mosaic Law reflected the purposes of God, whose work, as we heard in the reading from Deuteronomy, 'is perfect, for all his ways are just. [He is] a faithful God who does no wrong; how righteous and true is he!' (Deut 32.4) One of the striking characteristics of this Law was its unity. No distinction was made between the rules about religious worship and sacrifices, fair weights and measures in the market, or personal morality. All were equally part of Israel's duty to God; all equally part worship. The sharia has the same characteristic; all its provisions are seen as part of the Muslim's duty to God. It is this sense of unity in the law that we have lost in the West; we no longer believe that all our duties, sacred and secular, are owed to God.

One of the enduring prophetic insights was that Yahweh spoke to his people through the ordinary historical events of the times. If this is a true insight about the nature of God, and I believe that it is, then he must continue to address us in this way. The protest of Islam against Western policy, for which some

are prepared to die, should make us think. David Goldberg's students clearly considered western democratic states to have lost something essential for human happiness, and thought a theocratic state to offer a better model. Do we have something to learn?

To take the second point first, it has to be said that the world's experience of theocratic states has not been encouraging, even though that seems to be the original Biblical model. When Israel demanded a king so they could be like the other nations, Samuel interpreted the demand as the rejection of Yahweh as King. However, closer to our time, the American jurist James Madison observed that power is of an encroaching nature, and throughout history it is clear that the concentration of both religious and secular power in one set of hands leads not to liberty but to repression. As Lord Acton famously said, 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' The brutal reality of this was seen only too clearly in the régime of Saddam Hussein, and we see it today in Zimbabwe. Power needs to be dispersed, and in Israel after Samuel power was divided between prophet, priest and king. At first this was seen as the rejection of God by Man; but in the light of history I think we should see it as God's wisdom for Man.

But if power is dispersed the risk is that spiritual authority will be eclipsed by more powerful secular interests, and our spiritual needs will be ignored. The realisation of this risk, and its attendant moral decline, is what lies at the root of the Islamic protest. We are, in effect, being reminded of where we began, namely that some common moral and spiritual foundations are essential if power is to be effectively shared between different authorities in the state. There has to be some agreement on the ends of society and on the means of achieving those ends, if we are to avoid on the one hand repression, and on the other hand anarchy. When the prophets spoke out against the kings of Israel they knew that they accepted the ultimate sovereignty of Yahweh just as they did. It is precisely this common acceptance of authority that we have lost in the West and which the Islamic nations want to preserve. The secular alternatives simply cannot fill the void. We try to cover up the void with ideas like tolerance, political correctness and multi-culturalism, but none of these is adequate to build a true spiritual foundation. The lack of this foundation is only too apparent in the widespread anxiety of our age and its search for meaning and for roots.

We fail to understand the state properly if we believe it can be established solely on political or economic foundations. States need spiritual foundations also – this, essentially, is what an established church symbolises – and this is what the sharia provides for an Islamic state. It ought not to have been a surprise, therefore, when a powerful Islamic movement appeared in Iraq after the war, but it was. Nor should its religious character be a surprise. One of the things that characterised the closing decades of the twentieth century was the rise of religious fundamentalism – not just among Muslims, but among Christians and Hindus also. Religion provides a means of expression for basic human needs, and when those needs are not met and the spiritual side of life is ignored, as in the liberal West, then those needs and that side of life will force themselves upon our attention. And the more they are ignored, the more violent will be the reaction, including people willing to give their lives for the cause, believing that killing others is the right thing to do.

We could, perhaps, write this off as dangerous religious fanaticism were it not for the fact that countless millions of ordinary people feel moved to add their voices to the protest. At the end of the last century we saw widespread protests against the extension of free market principles into all aspects of social policy, leading today to the increasingly violent protests against globalisation. We are simply not prepared to be defined solely as consumers; we are primarily spiritual and moral beings, and it is this that our secular democratic idea of the state fails to recognise adequately. Before the atrocities overwhelm us we need to recognise that religious fundamentalism shows that something vital is missing from our polity.

Religion and politics will always be in tension. This tension is part of the dynamic force necessary for growth, whether political, moral or spiritual; and because a dynamic force is unstable there will always be victims. This perhaps, is why St Edward was acknowledged as a martyr; he was the innocent victim of the power struggle between the religious and secular forces of his day. In modern times we in the West have tried to suppress this tension, persuading ourselves that religion and politics can be kept apart. It is not possible. The power struggle being played out today is far more serious than the medieval family feud of which Edward was the victim, not just because of the appalling scale of the loss of life, but because at root it is about how we understand ourselves as spiritual beings. Martyrs, even the misguided and the vicious, are a sign that something vital, something that cannot be surrendered, is

at stake. Salman Rushdie put it well in a lecture in 1990. Reflecting on the collapse of Communism he said:

'As we witness the death of Communism in Central Europe, we cannot fail to observe the deep religious spirit with which the makers of so many of these revolutions are imbued, and we must concede that it is not only a particular ideology that has failed, but the idea that men and women could ever define themselves in terms that exclude their spiritual needs.'

(The Herbert Read Lecture, February 1990)

May God help us to learn this truth. Amen

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