

Inter-Cultural Christian Centre

Fredens Kirke, Østerbro, Copenhagen: 10th March, 2007

Talk 5: Community issues in cross-faith relating

Mullah Nasrudin

The King was in a bad mood. As he left the palace to go hunting he saw Nasrudin.

"It is bad luck to see a Mulla on the way to a hunt," he shouted to his guards. "Don't let him stare at me – whip him out of the way!"

They did so.

As it happened, the chase was successful.

The King sent for Nasrudin.

"I am sorry, Mulla. I thought you were a bad omen. You were not, it transpires."

"YOU thought I was a bad omen!" said Nasrudin. "YOU look at *me* and get a full game-bag. I look at YOU, and I get a whipping. Who is a bad omen for whom?"¹

- Nasrudin found himself helplessly subject to the king's interpretation of what might constitute a bad or good omen. He was powerless to prevent himself being seen as a bad omen and dissatisfied with a token apology – but what could he do? The apologiser was a king!
- Cross-faith relating does not take place in a vacuum. Good, and bad, things happen in cross-faith relating against a much broader backcloth. The events of 9/11 strongly masked some pretty desperate weeks in my country in which the fabric of society in various northern areas of England was coming under severe strain.

¹ "The Omen" taken from Idries Shah, *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*, Picador: London (1973), p 142.

- In May, June and July of 2001, there were “riots” in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in which mostly South Asian men of either Bangladeshi (in Oldham) or Pakistani origin reacted strongly to mobilisations by the neo-fascist British National Party. Such serious public disturbances, mirrored by lesser disorders in Leeds and Stoke-on-Trent, emerged out of a long, developing, pre-history:

The spread of unrest was linked to an increase in racial violence, long-standing mistrust of and disillusionment with the police, the overt and taunting presence of the BNP and other far-right groups, and the entrenched poverty and unemployment that existed within the cities.²

- The official response to such disturbances has been twofold. At a local level the criminal justice system came down hard on the “protesters”, especially in the case of those arrested for the Bradford riots. At a national level, there developed a focus on community cohesion, social capital and policy prescriptions based upon them.³ This focus has driven an attempt by government to relate to leaders of faith communities.
- In 2002, the Local Government Association followed the national government’s example, producing a report that encouraged local authorities to take action with faith communities.⁴ That report declared that faith communities are vital for:

...good health, as providers of pastoral care, promoters of citizenship and community development, voices for social justice, and as a locus for gatherings of people in varying economic and social positions, of differing political views, from a range of ethnic backgrounds with shared concerns.

- Hard on the heels of these developments, people like me and my equivalents in other faith communities began to be invited to all kinds of national, regional and local government forums. Sometimes one gets the sense that this is mere tokenism, so that some government official can tick the box that says “Have you consulted the faith communities?”

² Paul Bagguley and Yasmin Hussain, “Flying the Flag for England? Citizenship, Religion and Cultural Identity among British Pakistani Muslims,” in Tahir Abbas (ed.), *Muslim Britain: Communities under Pressure*. Zed Books: London, (2005), p 209.

³ The investigations into the rioting produced official reports. The Denham Report (*Building Cohesive Communities*) arose from a ministerial Group on Public Order coordinated by the Home Office. The Cattle Report (*Community Cohesion*) was produced by an “independent” Community Cohesion Review Team. The Ritchie Report, funded by the Home Office, focused on Oldham. The *Report of the Burnley Task Force* was commissioned locally. See *ibid.*, pp 210-213.

⁴ The report was entitled *Faith and Community: a good practice guide for local authorities*, LGA Publications: London, 2002.

Sometimes it might seem that central or local government is opting out of its own responsibility for providing services on the ground. But, by and large, there does seem to be an increasing willingness by central and local British government to involve local faith community leaders – at least by consultation – in local, regional and national community affairs. The key for people in our kinds of role is usually one of choosing where to become involved – selectivity is the name of the game. Where can I make the most strategic contribution by my presence and involvement?

International affairs

- Such relating in community matters as a Christian leader proceeds against the background of complex changes or manoeuvrings at international level. Samuel Huntington has probably won the media argument in gaining popularity for his not-very-helpful “clash of civilisations” thesis, and especially his focus in that thesis on an Islam with “bloody borders”, and his conclusion that the primary conflict of the present period is that occurring between Islam and the West. Whether or not we find Huntington’s thesis convincing, the truth is that religion is very much up there in terms of providing a dimension to many current world conflicts. And it is true, also, that Islam is a significant religious element in many major conflicts today. You’ll recognise both those realities if I just mention places of recent, major conflict: Chechnya, Afghanistan, Kuwait, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Gujarat, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Indonesia, Kosovo, Northern Ireland, Nigeria, Sudan.
- Local, cross-faith relating takes place in this broader context and is often influenced by it. Key, at local level, are relationships of trust, across the faith traditions, that have been built up over time. I mentioned in our second session that I am a Christian, Anglican representative on LAMAG, the Lambeth Multi-faith Action Group. At a recent open meeting organised in Brixton by that group, to which the highest officer of the Metropolitan police in Lambeth borough was invited to speak, we heard how previously well-cultivated relationships on the ground between some Lambeth mosque leaders and local police and government agency personnel greatly reduced potential tension at the time of the bombings of the transportation system in London in July 2005. They helped again several weeks later at the time of the failed terrorist bombings on tube trains in London, followed by the arrests of those concerned. There *were* backlashes in London against Muslims, but in Lambeth these were largely insignificant, partly due to the prior relationships between Muslim leaders and various statutory agencies such as the police, and because of the quick

expressions of solidarity made through various multi-faith forums by local other-faith leaders with the Muslim community at that time.

- In Britain, Christian leaders and especially Anglican bishops and Roman Catholic archbishops are credited with an influence out of proportion to their actual power. Stances taken by such people on international issues, such as the Iraq war of 2003, or injustices in Palestine/Israel, or on moral or ethical issues, win a lot of respect in Muslim and other faith communities. In November 2006, I attended a lecture in the House of Lords by the previous President of Iran, Mohammad Khatami. Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali hosted and chaired this event that allowed, at the heart of British government, an irenic statement of an Iranian perspective on international world order, Israel/Palestine and the development of nuclear energy for peaceful means. We need to pray for, and support, such influential, national faith leaders.

Education

- In my country there is a high proportion of young people, especially in the Muslim community. Our most recent census figures show that one third of all British Muslims are under fifteen years old, and another 18% are aged between sixteen and twenty-four. Education, inevitably, becomes a contentious issue for many within the Muslim community in Britain. A lot of good work has been done within local authorities, especially by SACREs, in helping facilitate the delivery of much more appropriate religious education. SACRE stands for Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education. Local education authorities are required by law to seek the appointment of Christian and other faith representatives to these committees that oversee the development of syllabuses for religious education, and the facilitation of acts of worship, in state schools. I served on one such SACRE for several years while I lived in northwest England.
- Church Schools, at both primary and secondary level, have a significant part to play in cross-faith relating in that many parents from Muslim and other minority faith backgrounds try to gain places for their children in such schools. They prefer their children to be brought up within a Christian ethos in a church school rather than in a secular humanist environment within a state school. In some parts of Britain state schools are, de facto, Muslim schools simply because all their pupils are Muslim. There is also a growing number of Muslim private schools. In more recent years, an increasing number of schools of Islamic foundation are being established, within the state system in Britain, though the government is currently expressing concern about

their effect on holding back community integration. At the moment various government ministers are suggesting and then retracting requirements that faith schools should, for example, be required to include as 25% of their intake children from other faith or non-faith communities. The principle may be good, but the knee-jerk manner in which the matter is being imposed and superimposed only serves to convince Muslims that they especially are being targeted as non-integrating members of British society.

- The picture across the nation is very varied, and in our government's defence I have to say that there does seem to be an unhelpful process of Balkanisation going on, especially in some of our northern cities, where the opposite of integration is being actively pursued, especially within some Muslim communities. Whether such a process of Balkanisation is the chicken or egg, I don't know. Does feeling that one is being victimised produce defensiveness or does defensiveness encourage victimisation?
- Whatever. What really concerns me, actually, is that the arguments about faith schools versus state schools hides a much deeper issue that goes to the heart of what education is deemed to be about within our society. I imagine that issue is common to all of us in Europe and Scandinavia. Here is what I mean.

In the mid-1980s, representatives of Muslims living in Birmingham and representatives of Birmingham schools managed to agree a document that was called *Guidelines on Meeting the Religious and Cultural Needs of Muslim Pupils*.⁵ Whilst the Guidelines document was considered a step forward in terms of handling some of the "hot potatoes" of school life – things like assemblies, collective worship, prayer facilities, religious holidays, respect for modesty, segregation of sexes, teaching of music, dance, drama and sex education, and provision of halâl food – most of the Muslim members of the working party were dissatisfied with the end result because of a more fundamental concern. They felt that the ideological basis of British schooling is incompatible with an Islamic worldview. Such incompatibility is a problem recognised by most Muslims in Britain, but little understood by British secular humanists. It has, at heart, to do with the separation in British society of the sacred and the secular. A Muslim from Birmingham expressed the problem in terms of the teaching of history:

⁵ Examined by Danièle Joly in 'Ethnic Minorities and Education in Britain: Interaction between the Muslim Community and Birmingham Schools.' In *Research Papers*, no 41 (March 1989), pp 1-28. p17. The *Guidelines* document was revised in 1999.

“... teaching history must aim to show the effects on society of diverting from divine teaching; the idea of responsibility to the creator must be promoted in the teaching of all subjects.”⁶

Another Muslim makes the same point with regard to the subject of economics:

“Islam views life as a compact whole and does not divide it into many separate and conflicting parts. The economic aspect is one of the most important parts of our life... The Islamic system is balanced and places everything in its right place. Islam has given detailed regulations for the conduct of ... economic life...!”⁷

Such views, that seem to pull the whole of life and learning under a religious umbrella, appear reactionary, unenlightened, even dangerous to a secular humanist worldview that has abandoned any commitment to one overarching “meta-narrative”. People who want to think in those terms are quickly – though falsely – labelled “fundamentalist”. How such disparate views of what “education” means might find reconciliation seems pretty difficult and pretty unlikely to me. Christians sit somewhere between the two. On the one hand we have a conviction that God is concerned about all aspects of our living, not just our piety. On the other hand we inherit a conviction from Jesus Christ that the secular world is valid in itself, that temporal authorities are put in place by God and need to be respected – not controlled – by us. There is work here for us to do!

- Higher education also is an important area for careful consideration, as far as cross-faith relating is concerned. The policy of my government has been to seek to radically increase the size of the higher education sector (the world of universities and so on). The further education sector, similarly, is an object of deliberate expansion by the British government. Many local, school sixth forms have been detached from the school setting and replaced by a further education college that is able to offer a much broader range of subjects, including “vocational subjects”, for study by 16 to 18 year olds. In many British cities, higher and further education compete with our National Health Service in terms of employing the greatest number of people. In the area of further education Muslims are over-represented in proportion to the population while the proportion of Hindus going on to higher education is greater than that of the white community. British universities strive hard to attract fee-paying overseas students, many of whom are from Muslim backgrounds.

⁶ Joly, *opus cit.*, p 17.

⁷ Ghulam Sarwar, *Islam Beliefs and Teachings*, The Muslim Educational Trust: London (1987), p 173.

One result of this increase in access for young people to further or higher education is that there is a significant proportion and growing number of people of other faiths within our education institutions. Muslims, especially, are often high profile. The provision of a prayer room, halâl food, and so on are normal, as are regular Islam awareness weeks or challenges to the Christian Union members for debate or dialogue concerning faith. Part of my experience while living in London has been that of being invited to a “dialogue” meeting at the London School of Economics, organised by FOSIS (The Federation of Student Islamic Societies in the UK and Ireland) during an Islam awareness week there. The dialogue turned out to be quite polemical, at least from the Islamic side, and nearly all the 150-member audience were Muslims, hungry to see the Christian vicar being eaten up and spat out! The role of chaplaincy teams in universities and colleges is critical in many ways in these days, for all students. Increasingly, Islamic Foundations in the UK are seeking to train and place Muslim “chaplains” in institutions of higher education – as also in hospitals and prisons. The pastoral role of chaplaincy work is a fairly new one for Muslims where leadership within their communities has traditionally cohered around teaching the faith and leading the prayers. A lot of support and relationship building can be achieved by Christian chaplains in this area. Christian students, also, can benefit enormously from finding themselves challenged by fellow students who are prepared to talk and live out their faith commitments in the public arena.

The Media

- In Britain, when you think Buddhism, you think the Dalai Lama; when you think Hinduism, you think yoga or diwali; when you think Sikhism, you think turbans instead of police helmets; when you think Islam, you think “Muslim terrorist” or the veil. The negative perception of Muslims in Britain is a major problem, and a problem that has been exploited, if not deliberately inflamed, by the media in our country. It is one of the topics being addressed by the newly formed Christian-Muslim National Forum, whose launch I attended in Lambeth Palace on the very day that Zaki Bedawi died in January 2006. Hook-handed Abu Hamza and other media darlings from the more extreme edges of Islamic conviction were constantly given prominence in our national media, while, for a long time, more responsible bodies like the Muslim Council of Britain found it difficult to get a hearing in the popular press.
- I have to say that in the UK there is, increasingly, good reporting of Islam and Muslim issues and a much more healthy exposure of

Muslims well able to communicate a non-Islamist, and *British*, perspective on contentious contemporary matters. Part of *our* role can surely be to help promote wholesome Muslim voices, and to help undermine negative stereotypes.

- At the same time, there is often a lot of ground to be recovered in our own Christian addressing of contentious issues. Well financed Christian ministries that advertise a strong Christian Zionist perspective or that demonise Islam or Muslims seem often to corner Christian media channels in order to propagate their views. Do those of us who are convinced Christians yet open-spirited in our approach to peoples of other faiths have the contacts, the financial backing, the gifts at communicating, to offer another view of being a faithful Christian in Europe or Scandinavia at the beginning of the third millennium?

Police and prisons

- Drugs, alcohol, prostitution, guns, people smuggling, asylum seeking, rivalries between gangs, ethnic groups and religious communities — the police in our societies have plenty to keep them busy! Mosques and synagogues, plus Muslim and Jewish graveyards, are the most frequently damaged religious buildings or burial grounds in my country. I left writing this lecture to attend a meeting of the LAMAG (the Lambeth Multi-faith Action Group) committee at the local Liberal Synagogue. When I arrived the police were at the building. Someone had evidently pinned onto the main doors two photographs of Palestinian women and children killed the day before by Israeli military action in Gaza. The photographs were enlarged to poster size and laminated. It was good timing that both the Roman Catholic priest on the LAMAG committee and I could show solidarity with our Jewish friends so immediately.
- The Metropolitan Police in London are just about recovering some equilibrium after the shameful exposure of rampant, institutionalised racism made plain through the Stephen Lawrence murder enquiry. They are now making unfortunate mistakes in arresting Muslims under anti-terrorism legislation. When large numbers of people from just one religious community are continually arrested and then released without charge, a sense of victimisation grows. Continuing imprisonment without trial of Muslims in Belmarsh remand centre adds to that sense of marginalisation. Grievances about disproportionate “stop and search” routines are now being asserted by Asian youths where five years ago they were asserted by Black youths. When our government views the problem of Islamism as primarily a security issue, it inevitably means that the police get used as a blunt instrument in the fight against

“terrorism”. If the government were to view Islamism more as an ideological matter, then it might grow more pro-active in recruiting Muslims themselves to address the problem as a problem for Islam, for Muslims. That would, of course, necessitate the British government’s listening to those same Muslims, “moderate” Muslims, in their critique of British foreign policy, and so on. Downing Street is not yet prepared to go there! The American and British invasion of Iraq to bring about regime change there, on behalf of others, colours the perception Muslims especially have of the police at home as an arm of this particular government. It is more of the same. I’ve already mentioned LAMAG as a vehicle for providing Muslims, along with other religious communities, a voice to local and national government officials in the borough where I live. We *can* be conveyors to our governments of other ways of addressing sensitive community matters. Those other ways are much needed at the moment. Muslim parents in Britain rightly feel offended when singled out and lectured to by a cabinet minister concerning checking up on what their children are up to. Look in your son’s wardrobe to find out if he is a Muslim terrorist! That is not a helpful way to go about building community cohesion!

- The British Home Office now has a Muslim Adviser, partly the result of the steep rise in the number of young, Muslim prisoners in my country. Two years ago, I spent a day in Wormwood Scrubs – a large prison in London for males – with an Anglican colleague who is part-time chaplain there. He introduced me to the part-time Muslim chaplain, fairly recently appointed. The chaplaincy team seemed to work well together, and where possible tried to encourage prisoners to see “a chaplain” – whoever was on duty – whatever the religious background of the prisoner or chaplain concerned. At the same time, specifically Muslim or Christian (or Jewish or Buddhist) pastoral care remains available, and prayer services for Christians and Muslims are held separately. The Muslim chaplain, of Pakistani background, finds himself the only resource for both Sunnî and Shī‘a prisoners, but at that time, that was not a problem for him. In another prison I visited, a women’s prison, there was considerable anger amongst non-religious or Christian-background women that all meals distributed throughout the prison were halâl – the prison simply couldn’t afford the staff to deal separately with food preparation, so went the route of least resistance – although the percentage of Muslim prisoners was tiny. That didn’t help the way in which the majority of the prisoners viewed the Muslim inmates. Christian chaplains within such institutions (this applies to health and education as well) are still seen as the primary providers of pastoral care. It is for such chaplains to learn to relate appropriately to other-faith colleagues, and, hopefully, to understand some of the concerns of prisoners from other-faith backgrounds. I am convinced that many of them are, and do! For eight years I worked as a priest in

northwest England, near Liverpool. One of Britain's three "special hospitals" was located in our large parish. Special hospitals are adapted prisons where the criminally insane are held "at her majesty's pleasure" in our country. I knew well the Anglican chaplain to Ashworth hospital. One time, he called me in for consultation on some of the attitudes of Muslim patients to their illnesses and to their courses of treatment. Some of the issues under discussion turned out to be about a Muslim worldview that took seriously the reality of, for example, jinn and other spirit beings, and their potential effect on humans. Some of the issues were about cultural themes, especially those of honour and shame, that influenced patients' behaviour in front of other patients or carers. The debate was about whether some cultural customs or worldview convictions that were part of the norm for Muslim patients were being interpreted by doctors in the hospital as part of their patients' pathology, as evidence in fact of their patients' illnesses. That was in the early 1990s. My colleague's successor as chaplain to the hospital is well able now to leave such matters in the hands of a part-time Muslim colleague. There are many such places where those of us who have learned to relate somewhat across the faiths can offer our simple insights in a profoundly significant way.

- Perhaps I could end – indebted as I have been throughout these sessions to the helpful input of Andrew Wingate in his book *Celebrating Difference, Staying Faithful* – indebted to him here for a quotation from a leading, younger Muslim academic. Dilwar Hussein is a Research Fellow at the Islamic Foundation, Leicester, and in the following words he is addressing himself to Muslims, but he could well be speaking to us all:

Muslims are now part of the West so the discussion is not really between 'them' and 'us', but between 'us' and 'us', amongst ourselves, with our common humanity. Talk of 'clash of civilisations' in this context is not only dangerous and irresponsible (for the false fault-lines it perpetuates), it is also foolish... Muslims living in the West may not agree with certain material motivations in the West or the way the family is being neglected, and on these issues they may stand together with many of their fellow citizens of Christian and other faiths, and non-faith backgrounds. Muslims living in the West may take issue with the current state of social and international justice, and they would, again, stand with the majority of their fellow citizens. On concern about the environment, again Muslims would stand with the people. It may be possible that in each of these cases 'the people' would be different groups.⁸

- That seems to me to be a really healthy and mature approach to citizenship being made by a British Muslim. Can we meet him halfway?

⁸ Dilwar Hussein in *Emel*, July/August 2004, p 16.

- For me, the matter of finding resources for pursuing this path of cross-faith relating is essentially a spiritual matter. It is a spiritual matter because it is about caring for the stranger in our midst whoever that person is, about loving our neighbour as ourselves and often that neighbour is a person of faith, about going the extra mile in support of the religious Other, and about standing up for vulnerable fellow Christians wherever in the world they may be found. It is a spiritual matter because I think we need the inspiration of the self-emptying God to persuade us to step out of our own world and glimpse what life might be like for someone functioning within a very different world. It is a spiritual matter because incarnational living doesn't come naturally to us human beings; we find it difficult to yield control or force of argument to another. It is a spiritual matter because Jesus Christ chose the path of dying to reach to glory, the way of weakness to arrive at strength, the giving up of life to achieve everlasting life. How we need to be renewed at the spiritual source of our lives and not live by second-hand or distant connection to the author and finisher of our faith. My final Nasrudin story suggests that closeness to the source is the primary prerequisite for continuing sustenance. It is called "Duck Soup".

Mulla Nasrudin

A kinsman came to see the Mulla from somewhere deep in the country, bringing a duck as a gift. Delighted, Nasrudin had the bird cooked and shared it with his guest.

Presently, however, one countryman after another started to call, each one a friend of the friend of the "man who brought you the duck." No further presents were forthcoming.

At length the Mulla was exasperated. One day yet another stranger appeared. "I am the friend of the friend of the friend of the relative who brought you the duck."

He sat down, like all the rest, expecting a meal. Nasrudin handed him a bowl of hot water.

"What is this?"

"This is the soup of the soup of the soup of the duck which was brought by my relative."⁹

⁹ "Duck Soup" taken from Idries Shah, *The Exploits of the Incomparable Mulla Nasrudin*, Picador: London (1973), p 158.

Discussion topics

- What are the two key community needs in your area? How would you work at enabling those needs to be addressed by more than your own Christian community?¹⁰
- How would you respond if a Muslim asked you whether you were a Christian first or Danish (etc) first? How would you expect them to respond to the same question, whether they were a Muslim first or Danish (etc) first?¹¹

¹⁰ Found in Andrew Wingate, *opus cit.*, p 174.

¹¹ Found in Andrew Wingate, *opus cit.*, p 175.