

OPINION PAGE IN IRISH TIMES

WHAT IS MISSING IN ISLAM IS NEED FOR MODERN THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTS

Does not the Koran need to be recognised for what it is - a historically-conditioned and culturally-conditioned human product - asks Andrew Furlong

I congratulate Mary Fitzgerald for her outstanding and beautifully-crafted articles over the last five months on the many faces of Islam. I will explain shortly that I am concerned about the missing face of Islam, only briefly glimpsed in her articles, though she may have felt that this "missing face" was beyond the scope of her series.

As she made clear, the bitter conflicts Muslims face are largely within their own religious movement (is it not so in all the religions?) rather than between Islam and other religions or "civilisations", significant and often violent as such conflicts have been. Mohammed Ali, an Iraqi Shia who lives in Ireland, told her: "For [to] some Sunnis, we have always been unbelievers."

The moderate voice came through strongly in her articles, as did this dark side of Islam, which has been so harshly and tragically experienced in many parts of the world. She began with the heart-rending story of the bombing of a hotel in which there was an Islamic wedding reception. Among the murdered were the bride's parents and her husband's father. The suicide-bombers were a Muslim husband and wife. The wife's bomb did not go off and she survived and was arrested and brought to trial. Nadia, the bride, said: "The people who do this kind of thing are terrorists. They do not have any relationship with Islam . . . The message of Islam is peace. Peace with ourselves, peace with others, peace with the whole universe."

As the people Mary Fitzgerald interviewed reflected on both a religion

which legalises appalling human rights abuses and on the troubled world in which we all live, I have asked myself did they come up with diagnoses that were sufficiently deep and with prescriptions that might enable the building of a reformed religion, respectful of women and of human rights in general, and the shaping of a more tolerant and peaceful world?

I did not think so, nor did I consider that they faced the big, awkward - but ultimately empowering - challenges that modern scholarship has been posing to all religions, not just to Islam. It is these deficiencies that I refer to as the missing face of Islam.

To take the last issue first - theology is seen by modern scholarship as a human product, which is not to deny that God may be real. For example, in a previous era it might have been believed that the gods revealed to humanity that each had taken the initiative to choose an ethnic group to support, protect and fight alongside in battle. Now it is recognised that such beliefs are simply human claims originating in human minds. Despite asserting that they have knowledge about the character or will of God, all the religions also contain the contrary idea that God, if such a reality exists, is beyond comprehension and unknowable to us in this present life. All we have, therefore, are our speculative ideas about this awe-inspiring but hypothetical reality.

Although the Hebrew and Christian scriptures were once believed to be inerrant and dictated from heaven, the majority of scholars no longer accept this. Similarly with Islam, does not the Koran need to be recognised for what it is - a historically and culturally-conditioned human product? I regretted that Mary Fitzgerald did not allude to how modern scholars (including some Islamic ones) question the traditional orthodoxy when she wrote about the Koran that "Muslims consider it to be the direct word of God".

Although she did later on write "In Pakistan I met activists who challenge the idea that Sharia law is an immutable body of divinely-ordained codes, echoing Muslim reformers in Europe and the US" and "the Muslim world contains many examples of those who strive for an interpretation of Islam that is both authentic and modern".

She interviewed the British pop singer Sami Yusuf, who is an icon to

many young people in the Islamic world: "I think Muslims want to see not a celebrity, but some sort of famous Muslim personality that they could look to and say 'this is the guy who represents us instead of bin Laden and his crew'. We, as Muslims, need to dare to think." This singer uses modern technology in recording studios, and though concerned about terrorism and human rights, does not employ modern scholarship when thinking about his faith; indeed, he doesn't seem to be aware of it.

"My modern life [in Egypt] and my Muslim life are parallel with each other, and there is no reason why they shouldn't be," Mary Fitzgerald quoted a 29-year-old Egyptian man as saying; but parallel lines don't meet, do they? I believe that modern scholarship is needed for joined-up, integrated and holistic thinking. This awareness of the need for modern theological insights is part of the hopeful, but largely missing, face of Islam, only barely glimpsed in these articles.

As far as diagnosis and prescription are concerned, these important and, to some people, threatening questions posed by modern research about the status of the Koran are relevant here.

What is the reason for taking it literally when it is so ambiguous and contradictory, just like other ancient scriptures? Has it divine authority or is it a human, culturally-conditioned product? Is it permissible to say: "That is what people claimed hundreds of years ago to be right or to be the will or revelation of their god, but what they believed then does not constrain how I think today"?

Relevant also are a gendered analysis (undertaken by women) and a searching human rights-based approach for understanding traditional patriarchal - and often cruel - Islamic societies. Peaceful, negotiated and democratic management of change will be one of the hardest tasks to accomplish. As human beings, we are nearly all free to search for meaning, wonder and values in the face of the implacable mystery of our existence. Why are we here at all? But, given that we are here, we need to search for spiritual and political visions for living.

As global citizens today, could we not think in terms of a resource of wisdom and spirituality fed by the religions, by art and culture, and by history and science, which we can draw on critically as well as add to

judiciously? Do we have to be either just a humanist or a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Christian etc, or any of these?

Neolithic communities 5,000 years ago could not have imagined today's landscape. Religions are transient. Can one accept that there will be other ways of being human? Perhaps the universe exhausts all of life's meaning, but on the other hand there may be a mysterious reality that completes its meaning; and, supposing that that were so, how should we try to speak of it? Muslims call it Allah. Do they not need to ponder more deeply on the implications of calling Allah unconditionally loving?

Andrew Furlong holds degrees in Philosophy and Theology and studied Contemporary Islamic Thought and Human Rights at the Irish School of Ecumenics as part of an M. Phil degree in International Peace Studies. An advocate of reform in religions originating in a pre-scientific world, his stand in 2002 as Church of Ireland Dean of Clonmacnoise on the interface between modern scholarship and scriptures and dogma held to be divinely authorised cost him his job when his doctrinal views were considered unacceptable by his church. He is the author of *Tried for Heresy: A 21st Century Journey of Faith*.

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