



Patience and the Courage to Change

Lewis R. Scudder, Jr.
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As Christians we've come through the season of Easter and we're now well into the Pentecost/Trinity season. In the Christian experience, radical and even cataclysmic change came upon the world in those days, and the experience is not over ... no, not by a long shot. That's just what the Pentecost experience is all about. Change comes ... change comes ... change comes. But a great many of us would like it to be genteel and unobtrusive so that we don't really notice it. Pentecost, however, doesn't work that way. It's always had a boisterous and bullish way about it. Since then Pentecost Christians have scattered worldwide, embracing as they did so all the momentous changes that the scattering implied.

And in that light it has always bemused me how people (not least of all *Christian* people) have evaluated the so-called Muslim 'diaspora'. There are Indonesians and Pakistanis, there are Palestinians, Moroccans and Iranians, Turks and Iraqis, there are Filipinos and Muslims from a broad swathe of Africa and other cultures (leave aside the home-grown converts). There are millions of them and they've emigrated from their homes to the West — to Germany, Holland, Denmark, Britain, France, the US, Australia, New Zealand and points in between. They have come into western society with high expectations. And we should not forget that ... their expectations. That's been a kind of Pentecost too.

But an assertive ripple has arisen — it's still more a fish fin's slap in a small pond than an ocean-going tsunami but it has a lot of quixotic funding and bemusing media favor ... it could grow — that is trying to convince us that Muslim immigration into western society is fatefully seditious. Be warned, they say, because of the immigration and, more significantly, the higher fertility rate of the Muslim community, we'll shortly be saluting the 'Islamic Republic of Great Britain' or its equivalent in other European countries and, who knows? maybe even in the United States.

That paranoia is trying to convince us that we should erect barriers that will forestall this kind of corruption of western values and western civilization. Some are even suggesting that Muslims should be evicted from western society altogether. (Shades of the Grand Inquisitor!) It's a crusader mindset. Whatever the 'dirty Muslims' are thinking of doing to us, we've got to do it to them only we've got to do it *first!* This melds quite seamlessly with the extreme Zionist propaganda line (currently very much in vogue in Israel) that suggests the nuclear bombing of Iran would be a good and righteous thing. Wipe out a 5,000 year old culture ... for what?

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I've a xenophobic British acquaintance (not a friend, mind you) who, from time to time, feeds me some of her propaganda, both American and British. She usually slips into her sendings the message, "This is *so* scary!" But I've stopped responding to her

(and to her equally 'scary' husband). There are some minds that are just ossified. Ah! but that's another tale. We need Ezekiel to prophecy to the dry bones again.

We've got to take a sober look at what Muslim emigration from so-called Islamic countries suggests. Perhaps it's true that the first generation of immigrants into western culture will try their level best to see that their progeny remain true to the motherland and its parochial culture. It's not just Muslims who do that. To one degree or another, all immigrant communities do same thing and have done. (I've in mind particularly the Christian Tamil community in and around Chicago, but there are other precedents ... historically, not least of all the Irish Catholics in Boston, the Italians on the East Coast, and the Dutch in mid-America. I vividly recall my shock in seeing the bumper sticker popular in the Grand Rapids area in the late 1950s: "If you ain't Dutch, you ain't much!")

Under the curious doctrine of 'multiculturalism' ethnic groups have been more successful in asserting their separation and distinction in Britain than elsewhere, and forming mega-ghettos. But, even in Britain, the second and third generations are moving in different directions to their forbearers ... not always healthy, but certainly *different*. The parents' own act suggests it. They've moved deliberately into a new environment and, whether they fully appreciate it or not, that has initiated something of sea change if not an actual revolution in cultural and religious values.

Think about it. What is it that drives people to emigrate from their home cultures and native lands? That's a radical and disruptive decision. There is the economic factor, of course. Don't rule that out. But who is migrating these days? It is the middle class and some of the upper middle class — people with skills, educated people with financial resources. We're not talking about 'your poor, your huddle masses' any more. These are, by and large, university graduates and even people with post-graduate degrees. But what is it that moves them?

There's no really 'right' answer to that question. But, if there is such an answer, it has a whole lot to do with people's desire for a better life for their children in an open environment where they can aspire. And it is freedom that people get, like it or not, a freedom that challenges and often casts aside old cultural and social norms. That's no less the case with the broad spectrum of Muslim émigrés than with any other migrating group. The live issue seems to be the ability of the receiving community to expand its awareness and let the generational transformation take its course.

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President Barak Obama has delivered himself of a manifesto on how America will deal with the so-called Muslim world. I say 'so-called' because there's no such thing. There are a variety of very distinct cultures with Islam as their shibboleth. But the true grounding for all of them is a quite straightforward agenda of economic and political issues that must be addressed.

Religion is *not* the issue even though it might be the catch-basket for a lot of other extraneous stuff ... a lot of vacuous and sometimes vicious rhetoric. But one thing President Obama said bears underlining: America is not Islam's enemy. The Israeli establishment has greeted President Obama's remarks like a camel with an offending object thrust up into its tender parts, and well it might. Many others in the Middle

East are well content with what they heard, and well they should be. Still others remain in stasis. But action is the stuff of certainty, and Obama yet needs clarity of thought to act.

His comparing a nation state to a religion is a bit like comparing apples and oranges. It can't be done, but, paradoxically, it did address a public perception. In a post-Christian era many still hark back to a time and to a self-perception that no longer pertains ... the imperial notion of 'Christendom'. Living in something of a fantasy, a good many western Christians still believe theirs is a 'Christian' culture and their country a 'Christian' country. But for many decades now — not least of all since the holocausts of two world wars and the Nazi essay in Jewish extermination — we know that it just ain't so no more. And that's not all bad.

Christians in the West have been clearly and finally cut loose from what Nicholai Berdayev, many years ago, angrily labeled 'the Babylonian Captivity of the Church', the circumstance wherein the Church became complicit and entangled in imperial politics, and was given the role of symbolizing popular culture. Leave aside the fact that public funds underwrote some of the Christian Church's truly great monuments in Europe and the Byzantine Orient. The so-called Muslim World can say the same. That ancient equation between religion and political legitimacy is finally coming unstuck, thank God!

The so-called Muslim world will, sooner rather than later, have to endure the same stormy passage into religious liberation. (Judaism, once it divests itself of the Zionist dead end, will soon have to play catch-up.) The navigation of that passage has already begun for Muslims. In what my friend, Mahmoud Ayyoub, refuses to think of as a diaspora, Muslims are already engaged. If they feel free, so much the better. Islam is a universal religion, Ayyoub argues: wherever a Muslim is, that Muslim is 'at home', not alienated by having been transposed into some sort of hostile environment. Ayyoub's is a revolutionary insight that we must take seriously. We are into a new time and a new struggle for 'the hearts and minds' of Muslims not only in the West but also throughout the world. And it is preeminently ... and uniquely ... a Muslim struggle. And it's not the first time this sort of thing has happened.

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We're moving into a new era of global engagement. Some of us — Christians be we, Jews or Muslims — want to pose that engagement as a political and even military confrontation. The war is on! Slaughter the bastards! ... but of course with finesse ... but let not finesse obscure the objective. In that vein, we're essentially back into the Middle Ages. But the gathering momentum is toward an altogether different outcome ... even a post-modern one ... and Obama gave indications of that. It just requires patience to perceive it. And I assume that Obama has some of that in store ... 'knock on wood!' In the end, it's a good thing he got started on this adventure early on in his presidential tenure, because it's going to take time, inflict pain, and there'll be a whole lot of noise. We've yet to hear the cacophony crescendo ... Jewish, Muslim and Christian. What I'm impressed by is Obama's courage, and courage is what it will take.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

NOTE: The longer Reformed Church in America missionaries serve, the more they come to see the ethical implications of Christian faith with the eyes of the people among whom they serve. We treasure our missionaries and are glad to know what they think. However, RCA Global Mission does not, itself, have partisan political views.