



The Violence-Faith Disconnect

Lewis R. Scudder, Jr.
Apaasia Village, Cyprus ... off Holland, Michigan
November-December 2006

Nancy and I have been having a special experience, and it is now drawing to an end. Far from where the sun rises, we came into the lands of the evening in mid-September, into mid-America's heartland of the Reformed faith — Holland, Michigan. The task before us has been to interpret Islam and the Middle East in an environment that has been so drenched in propaganda that truth, indeed, is a whole lot stranger than fiction. Don't think this hasn't been a challenge! And among the questions we've had to field with a depressing degree of regularity is, "Is Islam a religion that teaches violence?"

The matter returns to a weighted balance and a rational salting of realism. Those of us who have come to a personal conviction concerning non-violence do not represent the whole of our respective religious traditions and, even so, many of *us* compromise. There are shades and variations, and history bears witness that, *on the whole*, a place has always been made for violent behavior within almost every religious tradition (Buddhism not excepted) as it finds its cultural embodiment and compromises with power.

*

But how is it that violence is inculcated?

As a child in Kuwait, I remember teen-aged boys playing a game — I never did learn whether the game had name, nor did I ever play it. But one young buck would square off against another and then first one and then the other would take a walloping great swing at the other's body (never the head), knocking the other off his pins. The one on the ground would then laugh uproariously, pick himself up, and have *his* 'go'. The game would continue, blow-and-counter-blow, until one or the other finally either got bored or a bit fuzzy. Then there'd be more boisterous laughter, they'd drape their arms over each other's shoulders, and go off to some more pacific pastime. I think the trick was to show that you didn't mind the pain. There never did seem to be a winner.

In my experience there was no other game quite like it. And it always seemed a bit strange to me because, by and large, Kuwaiti society did not encourage violent behavior among the young. Traditionally, of course, a young man received training in the use of weapons and in horsemanship, and learned the traditional lore of Bedouin combat and that sort of thing. Although that was just a tad before my time, those things were not looked upon as games. They were soberly undertaken and a competent, mature mentor acted as guide. Now, of course, those things have been given over to what is called 'national service'. Even now, the use of games to nurture violence in the young is not encouraged in the Arab society I have known.

I eventually became aware of the contrast between what I'd grown up with in Kuwait and what, in western society, we glorify euphemistically as 'contact sports' or as the

‘manly art of self-defense’ or other athletic or paramilitary role-playing games for the young. We train particularly our young males to be competently violent; we also groom a whole bevy of blushing and nubile maidens to spur them on in their exuberant aggressiveness. (We call them ‘cheerleaders’, God help us!) In these days of gender equality, though, girls are learning how to do violence too, and I guess we can chalk that up to progress. But what are they all being dedicated to? Is it not violence and its glorification? So, being asked this particular question in this particular environment has been a bit strange.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I am a person of my culture. For as long as it lasts, I will plunk myself down on a Sunday afternoon and watch American professional footballers wallop each other, a million bucks a whack. They have their reward; I have mine. But I don’t mix any of this up with my religious commitment. It’s all a contradiction, I know, but I insist upon the disconnect.

And that’s what makes the question with which we’ve been faced so surrealistic.

It’s particularly surrealistic in a country where the saying was coined, “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s whether you *win*.” It has nothing to do with ‘how you play the game’. Which, being interpreted is, ‘sportsmanship is for wimps’. In American mythology and in American folk ethics, winning is *everything*. And that is one reason why, for the foreseeable future, don’t bet against America, no matter what the game is. There’s a drive to dominance in this ‘New World’ culture of ours that cannot be gainsaid and is quite intimidating. It’s not going to moderate any time soon, and violence is a key ingredient in the mix.

The present American passion seems to be not reducing violence so much as it is making violence ‘safer’. Today’s icon may well be the American soldier who goes into the field dressed like a sinister ‘Michelin Man’. This is no virtual reality game; it’s the real thing. Our culture spends trillions on making our violence more effective and, for us, less risky. That is where we invest in both technique and technology most heavily.

“Ah!” my voyeuristic Mr. Hyde demurs, “when I return to my noble Dr. Jekyll avatar, there’s a disconnect between my faith-imbued side and my other ... pagan ... violent side. The one does not impinge upon the other.” But, if we remember the moral of the story aright, Hyde was the undoing of Jekyll, wasn’t he? Technique and technology have their demonic potency and potential — or at least that’s the tale’s testament and perhaps the altogether too real evidence of our day. And we need to remind ourselves here that we’re speaking of culture and not the religions that accompany it.

*

But let’s get back to the seminal question: Is Islam really a religion of violence? To get at a valid answer, we need to transpose the key. The ‘key’ into which I want to transpose the question is the business of how religion relates to political power, traditionally the arbiter of significant violence.

Islam arose in an environment wherein power structures were very loose. During the Prophet Muhammad's own lifetime, Islam itself became the binder for a strong, coherent, inclusive political authority. And it was not long before subtle compromises had to be made to accommodate the ambiguities that inevitably arose. For its part, the Church emerged into an environment already controlled by a strong, very militarized, central authority quite alien to the Church's principles of social order and justice. In order to accede to political power, after centuries of political impotence, the Church had to win the state's approval and then participate with the state in a sort of mutual baptismal or ordination, a process marked by the articulation of the so-called 'ecumenical creeds'.

Although western commentators bewail Muhammad's donning the robe of political leader, I cannot for the life of me see what other choice he had. For its part, I doubt whether the Church — being on its way toward forming a universal community — could have rejected this option. This cup, for better or worse, had to be drunk and it was not mere failure of nerve and greed that dictated it.

Therefore, while both Islam and Christianity have had to struggle with the anomaly involved in the intimate joining of spiritual and earthly power, they engaged the struggle from distinctly different starting points. The ideal, however, remains supreme in both communities. While Muslims conceive their role with respect to power to spring from the model of a time past when it was rightly exercised, Christians see it prefigured in the person of Christ but fully to be realized in mundane terms at some indefinite point in the future. Nonetheless they both relate to mundane power in terms that are potentially seditious and revolutionary ... or, if you prefer, prophetic. Both address political authority speaking with the authority of God who *alone is King*, and whose will is not to be confused with the will of the state. And the over all lesson is this: Earthly power and its proper use is a basic theological issue given by the human condition. It is universal. It crops up everywhere.

*

The Muslim community, while it has spoken about armed effort sometimes as 'struggle in God's cause' has never spoken of war or violence as 'holy'. What God seeks and blesses in a believer is God-focused effort — *jihâd*. Before his death Muhammad spoke about moving on from the lesser *jihâd* (that is armed conflict) to the greater (*al-jihâd al-akbar*), or the spiritual struggle of the believer to conform to God's will. At the very least, this popular quotation is indicative of the Muslim ideal to seek peace and pursue it, bearing in mind that it is always balanced against a Muslim realism concerning how flawed human society works. There is at the core of Muslim praxis a *qur'ânic* pragmatism that is really quite admirable and eminently rational (Pope Benedict to the contrary notwithstanding).

So people ask, 'What about these suicide bombers ... what about 9/11/01 ... what about al-Qâ'idah ... what about the sectarian violence in Iraq ... what about ... what about ... *ad infinitum*?' The 'Crossfire' gambit of 'what about ...' comes a close second to 'yes, but ...' or 'you didn't mention ...' as techniques for obfuscation, for intimidation and even, on occasion, for *mental* violence.

We need to balance religious imperatives against cultural and political (purely ‘secular’, if you will) instrumentalities. There is, indeed, a disconnect between faith and violence. The current rash of obscene violence expresses many things, but one thing it does *not* express is authentic faith, be that Muslim, Christian or Jewish. What the violence expresses is the ‘Dark Side’ or, in biblical terms, the desperate and ultimately fruitless aspirations of the ‘Destroyers of Earth’ (for the discerning, Revelation 11:18). Our own home-grown hawks and the al-Qâ‘idah phenomena belong to this ‘Dark Side’, of that I am absolutely convinced. One argues a Christian benediction and the other claims a Muslim. Neither is legitimate.

*

We come into the tide of Christmas. Is it even appropriate to be speaking of violence when we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace? Well ... let’s not forget the ‘Slaughter of the Innocents’ in this season, and the terror spread by Herod’s soldiers. Jesus’ time was also a violent time.

But let us take the discussion a bit further. If, as I contend, violence and faith can be disconnected, then there is a time for kneeling at the manger of an infant ... God with us. There is a time for saying, ‘Peace on earth and good will toward human kind!’ It is a time to appreciate afresh that peace begins with a commitment to speak the truth and to do justice. The Incarnation is eminently God speaking the truth and realizing justice.

To all who read these words, Nancy joins me in extending greetings and a prayer that this Festival of the Incarnation may be a time of rich blessing.

And I greet you (if somewhat at a distance) from the lands of the morning.