



Teaching ... 'Gloria'!

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In our little church of St. Barnabas in Limassol we've recently concluded a five-session seminar on 'Christians and Muslims in Our World'. Quite coincidentally, we were hard at work when, under UN auspices, leaders of world religions met in New York to address the problem of slander by one religious community against another. The second coincidence was a meeting between Roman Catholic and Muslim scholars in Rome. They focused on the issue of religious freedom and how to put a damper on bigotry and persecution of one group by the other. I might add that neither of those august gatherings paid us at St. Barny's any heed whatsoever. ... Their loss!

It strikes me, though, that lofty declarations by so-called leaders won't 'shift the load' for those, wittingly or not, already heavily burdened by prejudice. What's needed is an agenda for teaching people things of value that yields mature perception, a hands-on process to effect a transition in attitude — not necessarily a radical break but at least an opening of long-shut windows. We don't change our minds all that easily unless we are already of a mind to change. The *Qur'ân*'s thoughtful aphorism is, "God doesn't change what's in a people until they change what's in themselves." (13:11b) That is to say, teaching is important ... even crucial.

Especially since September 11, 2001, and the shocking violence that has followed in London, Madrid, Bali, Baghdad and now Mumbai, we western Christians have become tremblingly anxious about Islam especially as Muslims become a growing part of our societies, transforming them with new flavors, colors, ways of dress and customs, and challenging old ways, old presuppositions, old certainties. Particularly in Britain, some of our folk asked, "Are we breeding a generation of homegrown terrorists, the more so as we bend over backwards to give Muslims space?" That, of course, presumes that terrorism today is something new for us. But, as much as it finds homes elsewhere, terrorism is endemic to western society and culture. For instance, on the ideological Left, the Bolshevik Revolution fed into any number of movements that still pursue a capricious program of 'revolutionary violence'; on the Right, the Nazi reign of terror has spawned contemporary avatars in shocking places — indeed even among those who were themselves victims of that terror.

If terrorism is novel anywhere, it is so within mainline Sunnî Islam that has been remarkably resistant to the capricious violence that we call 'terrorist'. It is with stunned shock that Sunnî Muslims must now somehow deal with this alien amalgam of ideas and acts that stretch credulity. Some ideas *are* Islamic but the controlling ideological overlay is very strange to them, disorienting, unprecedented. But simply to say, "This is not Islam!" doesn't do it. Muslims must grapple with Islamist terrorism, its alien inspiration and methods, and demonstrate *especially to each other* the wrongness of contemporary Islamism and the terrorism it breeds. For them, especially now, teaching is not just crucial ... it is in every sense *absolutely vital!*

In our small event at St. Barny's we worked with these insights, and found we could move into new postures (if sometimes a bit awkwardly). To varying degrees we came to feel better poised, when opportunity availed or needs must, to meet Muslims with fair mindedness. We came better to understand James' warning: "Do not speak evil against one another. ... There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and destroy. So who, then, are you to judge your neighbor?" (James 4:11-12) At least we helped each other discover that disagreement need not necessarily be divisive. Our discussions and debates were lively and almost always civil. The group, in fact, is now asking for more ... if in a different key. And that is what I mean by 'a transition in attitude'. We found the air pouring in through newly opened windows refreshing and even something of a relief. In other words, *teaching really works*.

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Faith-in-practice is delicate and frangible. More than on any other level, faith challenged stimulates fear — be that faith in God, in country, in custom and culture or in anything else. And fear, as Frank Herbert rightly identified it in his *Dune* saga, is the mind-killer. It plugs up our spiritual breathing passages; it is the flu of the soul, a psychic virus that attacks the respiring and aspiring spirit. Our modern commercial media ghoulishly feed upon and spread it, and, since 9/11/01, our out-going American administration has used it to poison public policy, both foreign and domestic.

If there is one thing within Barak Obama's personal remit when he dons the mantle of his office, it is to administer an antidote to fear in public policy, and liberate the mind of the body politic so it can think with clarity and good judgment. That's what he asked for; *only he can make sure he gets it*. Knowledge and understanding are the only specifics I know against unreasoned fear. Obama is in a unique position to administer these. In effect, I guess I'm saying that he must be a teaching president on the model, perhaps, of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The first and most obvious task Barak Obama faces is more instructional than strictly pedagogical. He must first choose, teach and train his instructors. That means he must see that the justice, law-enforcement agencies and commercial watchdogs actually work in accord with America's Constitution (something undermined of late). Terrorism, as Muslim thinkers saw long ago, is a criminal activity often driven by ideological extremism (in Arabic, *ghulúú*). The wisdom says, respond to it is as to a crime. Deglamorize the terror business. It's *not* war. It's law enforcement.

The *Qur'ân*'s oft-repeated concern is that justice must be seen to be done. That is the first order of business in law enforcement ... no favoritism shown. The task must earn respect. It is in being so earned that Peter's exhortation makes sense: "For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong or to praise them who do right." (1st Peter 2:13-14) Critically, among other things, government does the work of policing crime and executing justice, and not infrequently that requires physical force. And that's OK. That's what government is literally *ordained* to do. Obama-the-teacher must instruct his government to do *right*. The fact that this will have international ramifications makes it more complex, but it does not change its nature. The key to doing right is doing *justice*, both at home and abroad. If Obama-the-teacher, forgets that, he's lost the game of governing before it has really begun.

Above all other professions, honor is due to the teacher. After all, it is as ‘teacher’ that Jesus was most frequently addressed and referred to. All the epistles (be they by Paul, Peter, James, John, the unknown author of Hebrews or the mysterious ‘John’ of Revelation) focus upon education: *Know* your faith and your world! *Act* in accordance with it! *Be decent!* The burden of the *Qur’ân* is much the same. The word for ‘knowledge’ (*‘ilm* and its various permutations) takes up an amazing eleven pages in my concordance to the *Qur’ân*! “Seek knowledge,” the Prophet is said to have remarked, “even if you must go to China to find it [i.e. to the uttermost parts of the earth].” Above all other factors, as the *Qur’ân* sees it, knowledge is the epicenter of moral behavior: *Know* your faith and your world! *Act* in accordance with it! *Be decent!* The education a teacher imparts removes the veils, abates the instinct to fear and reanimates the mind. Teaching is not only good; it is downright salvific.

On the faith level, the *Qur’ân* says, “There is to be no coercion [or, intimidation *ikrâh*] in matters religious.” (2:256a) In the same passage, it points out that faith is in God’s not human hands. But the *qur’ânic* principle may be extended. Coercion is simply unacceptable. It is a form of terrorism, after all, criminal by definition. It subverts the rational mind through fear and is a form of enslavement. It is the very antithesis of education, and education is a godly business.

Again the *Qur’ân* may be our guide. It says, “Do not debate People of the Book except with decency.” (29:46) That’s a broad pedagogical principle. Do not hector or declaim but be decent. Treat your interlocutors (read: *voters*) as intelligent and rationally endowed human beings and, if you do your job right, trust them (or at least *most* of them) to understand ... not necessarily to agree, but at least to *understand*. As Barak Obama adopts his role as America’s teacher, he must allow for, encourage and *listen to* debates on many issues and on many different levels affecting public policy. And he must use his pedagogue’s intuition to keep the debate going in a constructive, fair and decent manner. Teaching, he must already know, is a humanitarian and human art that makes a world of difference.

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God has never been silent. Even Muslims assert that God and his Word exist eternally together. As we anticipate the Festival of the Incarnation, we remember that there is an incarnational dimension to the ‘Word’. The Word comes ‘down to earth’, is ‘made flesh’ and dwells among us. We must listen up. We need to hope that Obama and, with him, other world leaders as well are listening up and learning that ‘*Gloria!*’ is a triumphant exclamation of the human soul. If we defang fear by understanding and if decency (that is, *justice*, not mere peace-and-security) is done we will be able clearly to voice it again. So in his truly marvelous vocation as teacher-elect we hail Obama. In that high calling may he, with God’s help, reclaim justice for us all and in it may we find our peace and, hence (*only hence!*), our security indeed.

Gloria in excelsis Deo!

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

An Apology: In my last (November) meditation I stated that Rahm Emanuel was “a foreign agent . . . indeed, an Israeli citizen.” This was wrong. As he should have done if he was not to be known as a foreign agent, Emanuel formally surrendered his Israeli citizenship when he embarked upon a career in American national politics. In email conversation with my friend Jim Zogby my fears about Emanuel and his potential role in the forthcoming Obama administration as a spokesperson for lopsidedly strong pro-Israel policies have been somewhat allayed . . . *somewhat*, but not entirely. Jim is also a teacher, and that’s a godly vocation.

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.