



The past need not be another country

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The well known and very disturbing Psalm 137 (at least its final verses) is a salutary warning about what can happen when some members of a population come to believe that their present homeland is in some way a land ruled by oppressors who are, or who have, destroyed their ancestral home. The anger builds and despair is expressed, no longer merely by weeping by the rivers of Babylon, but in extreme violence by dashing Babylonian babies' heads against the stones. For the writer of this Psalm the past is not where he is, in Babylon (though he may well have been born there long after the Israelites were taken into captivity), but somewhere else, in this case Zion, Jerusalem. His past is another country and for the Psalmist this precludes the opportunity of unfolding his faith naturally and coherently in his new land. I don't, in any way wish to diminish the sense of anger and injustice felt by the Psalmist towards the Babylonians but I do challenge the validity and ultimate efficacy of his violent response.

Today we are increasingly becoming aware that within our own country there are some who feel similarly about Great Britain even though they were born here-they feel as strangers in a foreign land and they are casting their eyes back to some idealised Muslim homeland. Some (and it should be emphasised they a very few in number) no longer merely weep but have, in a manner, dashed babies heads (that is to say the innocent) against the stones in the attacks of the 7th July and, as recent events continue to reveal, plans appear to be in progress to kill even more.

As in the case of the Psalmist I don't wish to diminish the anger felt by these young would-be suicide bombers-after all I am sure many of us here are deeply disturbed by present American, British and Israeli foreign policy and actions-but naturally I do question absolutely the validity of their violent response. They are wrong in the eyes, not only of our own



Christian faith and Christian derived culture, but also in the eyes of Islam.

A key question that is now being asked by many people is why are these youngsters unable to see Great Britain as their homeland and why is their past not British? Out of this question comes another, which is what might a genuine British Islam look like; an Islam which finds its home and roots here and, with all this land's inhabitants, seeks to make it a better place for all and a country dedicated to peace and justice around the world? Why cannot Jerusalem be builded here? As I raise these questions I want to stress clearly that I am not telling any Muslim how or what such a faith should, or could, look like; this is, of course, for British Muslim communities to develop themselves. But what I can do is remind us all that Britain's religious history contains two particularly stubborn British Christian heresies, both of which we as Unitarians affirm (though we don't think of them as heresies of course!), which connect profoundly with Islam and which can, potentially at least, offer Muslims a genuine connection with Britain's past.

The two heresies are-Unitarianism (the affirmation that God is One, a Divine Unity, and of the humanity of Jesus) and Pelagianism which, in essence, stressed the essential goodness of human nature and the freedom of the human will. Pelagius (354-418 CE) insisted that God made human beings free to choose between good and evil and that sin is a voluntary act committed by a person against God's law.

Both of these beliefs, the Unity of God and that humankind is not infected with incurable original sin, are as central to the Islamic faith as they are to our own. So much so that during the seventeenth century our own foundational document, the Racovian Catechism was denounced in 1650 by Francis Cheynell as a 'Racovian Alcoran.' In 1698, the Anglican preacher Robert South referred to an anti-Trinitarian (i.e. a Unitarian) as a 'Mahometan Christian.' As Nabil Matar in Islam in Britain 1555-1685 (CUP 1998) notes, '(e)vidently, those who ventured into anti-Trinitarian theologies were viewed as crypto-Muslims: as a result, orthodox theologians started seeing Muslims wherever they saw Unitarians' (p. 48). Whilst this



was clearly incorrect it was not entirely untrue because many of our Unitarian forebears quite simply believed that from their perspective, though faulty in certain ways, Islam offered not a *threat* to Christianity but a vital correction to the wrong turn Christianity had taken in 451 CE at the ecumenical council in Chalcedon. It seems clear from this that for Muslims in Britain our Unitarian heritage is, at least potentially, one they can share with us. Just think of the many great names who held Unitarian theologies and who are perceived of as being quintessentially British, among them John Biddle, John Locke, Isaac Newton, Samuel Clarke, John Milton, Joseph Priestley, Josiah Wedgwood, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell. The list could go on for a long time.

We come to a Unitarian Church, I hope, because we believe that faith in the Unity of God and the human example of Jesus that is preached and lived out here is, in some real way, true. But in the present political and social climate there is an additional pragmatic reason to join wholeheartedly our community, for we maintain an unbroken continuity with these early Unitarian figures. Continuity is important because it ensures that these important ideas are not 'museum pieces' but real, present and spiritually alive. How could they not be?-they constitute the very heart of our present and living faith!

In the light of the increasingly difficult questions arising out of a home-grown terrorism that is claiming Islam as its faith, some of you have asked me 'What can we do about this?' Well, one vital task you can undertake is to remind people, in our workplaces, in our schools and universities, in pubs, clubs and restaurants, in the queue at the Post Office, in all the places we meet and talk with people that our Unitarian faith reveals that actually, Islam need not necessarily be understood as some alien incomer. What we as Unitarian Christians hold central in our faith so too does the Muslim. We can remind people when they start ranting about the incompatibility of Islam with British life that we, as Unitarian Christians have been called many times in the past 'Christian Mohametans' and we know we our faith is wholly compatible with being British!



But the task is not simply to remind those who are Christian, or at least culturally Christian, that influential people and communities in British culture have expressed and continue to express a Unitarian-Pelagian faith but also to tell this to our Muslim brothers and sisters. If we don't tell them, who will? How many of you were even vaguely introduced to the proud and extraordinary history of our tradition during your history classes at school or university? By teaching and preaching our living history we may yet come to play an important role in ensuring that an Islamic faith can flourish here which can come to see this country as its homeland and not as some alien place. The past need not be for British Muslims another land—they can be loyal to this nation's history and identity in ways that do not compromise the integrity of their faith just as we have.

As Tim Winter (known by some of you as Abdul Hakim) who teaches at the Divinity Faculty here in Cambridge and who is often heard on BBC Radio 4's 'Thought for the Day' has written (British Muslim Identity, Cambridge, Muslim Academic Trust 2003 p. 24):

From the British perspective, the arrival of Islam should be seen not as the intrusion of an essentially alien worldview, but as the augmentation of an already diverse religious landscape some of whose features have already been shaped by Islam in past centuries, and which, particularly in the tradition which I have broadly characterised as Pelagian (-unitarian) and Platonic, is clearly hospitable to Islam's central concerns.

It is for Muslims in Britain to explore and publicise this connection. To further the prosperity and integration of their important community, British Muslim leaders should consider their place not merely amid the transient landscape of race relations commissions, halal meat issues, and local politics, but also amid the deep structures of national culture. Muslims here need to be geologists, recognising that the United Kingdom has produced many expressions of the religious quest among which they can feel a genuine sense of belonging, and which can remind them of the fundamental unity of humanity. For British Muslims, the past does not have to be 'another country.'

If we wish to ensure that the dreadful events recounted in Psalm 137 and acted out in this land on the 7th July do not continue to occur we can do no better than embrace William Blake's vision and try to build here in Britain a Universal Jerusalem without walls that can be lived in by Jew,



Muslim and Christian alike, not to mention those of other faiths and none.
We must all engage in the true great jihad, ONLY using moral and spiritual
swords, and so together struggle to create a better world for all and
singing as we go:

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.

Amen.