

Ipswich Unitarians

THE TALIBANISATION OF CHRISTIANITY

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Not long ago I was at a meeting attended by scholars from at least four Nonconformist denominations, including our own. All of those denominations share a common root in the Reformed Protestant Christianity of the 17th century – the ‘Old Dissent’, as it was once known. None of them would usually be associated with what is called ‘fundamentalism’, even if some are more conservative than others. I was rather surprised, then, when one of those present referred to what he called, ‘increasing Talibanic tendencies’, in his own and other Nonconformist churches. He was joking, of course, but I think this remark betrayed a genuine concern.

Within many Christian denominations there has been a distinct shift to the theological right in recent years. This has manifested itself in such things as: an increasing insistence on maintaining traditional ‘orthodox’ doctrines; suspicion of scholarship that might call them into question; an emphasis on worship styles that downplay rational thought and appeal to – and manipulate – emotion; an illiberal dumbing-down that is hostile to doubt, questioning and critical thought.

For scholars who value the intellectual dimension of faith, such as my colleague at that meeting, these tendencies are clearly disturbing. And neither should Unitarians feel too complacent about this. We may not have ‘fundamentalism’ to worry about, but we are not entirely free of that same hostility to reason and serious scholarship that afflicts other denominations, it’s just that it takes a different form. Our forbears were known as *Rational* Dissenters because they regarded reason as integral to a balanced and liberal faith, even if it was not entirely sufficient in itself.

But to go back to that remark about, ‘Talibanic tendencies’: what might that mean in a Christian context? And is it something we should worry about? And, for that matter, who *are* the Taliban anyway?

The Taliban (the word actually means ‘students’), insofar as they can be regarded as a single united movement, are, along with groups like al-Qaeda, an offshoot of what is, in any case, Sunni Islam’s most conservative – indeed, ultra-conservative – sect, the Wahhabis. Another name for them is, Muwahhidun, which actually translates as ‘Unitarians’! The Wahhabis adopt stances on many issues that are far more extreme than is actually required by the Qur’an, and this includes their attitudes to women and to people of other faiths. The Taliban, like al-Qaeda, are extremists even within a Wahhabi context. The fact that they have no compunction in murdering other Muslims, never mind anyone else, shows how very far they are removed from the mainstream of Islamic belief and practice.

To themselves, they justify their attitudes and activities by an appeal to their own idiosyncratic interpretations of scripture and tradition. The result is an oppressive and aggressive politico-religious ideology that holds in contempt, not only western liberal democracy and its values, but also interpretations of Islam that differ from its own. According to the ‘Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam’*, the 18th-century founder of the Wahhabi sect, Ibn Abd al-Wahhabi, “branded all who disagreed with him as heretics and apostates” – other Muslims included – and therefore deserving of the most severe treatment should they oppose him or stand in his way. It is this idea that drives groups like the Taliban and al-Qaeda in their ruthless drive for power within the Muslim world, and in their enmity to everyone outside it.

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But is, ‘Talibanic tendencies’, an appropriate term to use of ultra-conservative tendencies within Christianity? Could something like the Taliban regime that once ruled in Afghanistan happen in a western country with Christian roots? There have always been extremist Christian sects whose ideas included the oppression of women, hostility to other faiths, and intolerance of Dissenters and ‘heretics’. And there still are. In America – but not only in America – there are Christian sects whose outlook is not unlike that of the Taliban, even to the extent of using violence and murder against those they deem to be violating God’s laws. Their attitude to other Christians – especially liberal ones – is negative to say the least, while other faiths are dismissed as nothing more than devilish heathenism. The liberal values of western society are seen as decadent symptoms of the drift into godlessness.

These Christian extremists cannot simply be dismissed as an unimportant lunatic fringe. Their campaigns against the teaching of evolution in American schools, for example, are a significant threat to science education, and we have seen the beginnings of similar campaigns here. If such pressures were allowed to gain a foothold then centuries of intellectual progress could be undone by resurgent superstition, ignorance and bigotry. And it’s not just education that is at risk. Extremist ‘fundamentalism’ also poses a real threat to the rights of women and of people with a minority sexual orientation. In some cases, it even harks back to the days when racism and slavery were justified on supposedly scriptural grounds.

So, the Christian ‘Taliban’ are out there, but could they ever take over in a western country, as their Muslim counterparts once took over in Afghanistan? Well, in parts of the United States they have already become influential as what is known as the ‘religious Right’. And although the election of President Barack Obama seemed to indicate that their political prospects had waned somewhat, the increasingly fanatical opposition to him might suggest otherwise. The threat of a reaction against liberal, democratic and secular values – fuelled by extremist religious ‘fundamentalism’ – still exists, and not only in America. And it is the vulnerability of those values to a perception of moral and spiritual decay that makes the threat more pernicious.

When people feel that their society is in some sort of meltdown; when they yearn for someone or something to believe in and to follow; when they look for moral certainties but see only a vacuum; when they look for scapegoats to blame for the nation’s ills and their own misfortunes; when the intellect is neglected and disparaged in favour of emotion, feeling and unreason – when this comes to pass then the scene is set for extremism to flourish. And where once, in the last century, this might have taken the form of purely political ideologies, in the world today it is at least as likely to be cloaked – however falsely – in the garb of religion. This is what has happened in the Muslim world and it could happen in the West too, if a Christian ‘Taliban’ were to take advantage of the spiritual crisis presented by an increasingly vacuous secularism.

Now this may all seem a bit far-fetched, but it’s worth remembering that only a year ago the world faced a financial and economic crisis of phenomenal proportions. Hopefully, as bad as it has been, we might just about have got away with it this time. But who can say where people might have turned if the fragile structure on which our global civilization rests were to crumble? We are currently marking the 70th anniversary of the last time *that* happened!

I recently read a novel by the Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood, about an America where a weak and irresolute democracy has been overthrown in a ‘fundamentalist’ Christian coup. Entitled, ‘The Handmaid’s Tale’**, it portrays a situation in which dissidents and non-‘fundamentalist’ Christians are hunted down and publicly executed, and in which women are reduced to various forms of complete subjugation to a male power-structure. Those who object

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or rebel are executed or worked to death in slave-labour camps – and all, supposedly, with the authority of Scripture. It is a place run by an oppressive, and corrupt, regime uncannily like the Taliban regime that ruled in Afghanistan. It is a chilling and disturbing story, all the more so for being credible, given a particular set of circumstances. The novel's central character and narrator is a so-called 'handmaid', a woman whose sole role in life is to bear children for her 'commander' and his infertile wife. This perspective reminds us, should we need it, that when a 'theocracy' rules, supposedly in the name of God, it is inevitably a regime firmly in the hands of a male hierarchy and serving their all-too-human purposes.

When ultra-conservative Christians seek to justify their negative attitudes to women, they like to quote Bible texts: for example, '...you women must submit to your husbands' (I Peter 3:1). But even this notorious text is conveniently taken out of context. The passage later goes on to say:

In the same way, you husbands must show understanding in your married life; treat your wives with respect, not only because they are physically weaker, but also because God's gift of life is something you share together.'
(I Peter 3: 7)

This may not be quite the insistence on full equality that we affirm, but it is certainly not a justification for the reduction of women to mere chattels that male-dominated religious systems have imposed down the centuries.

It is a characteristic of dogmatic and oppressive religions that, while claiming to uphold the 'whole truth' of their scriptures and traditions, they actually use them selectively to enshrine their own partial opinions as the only valid ones. Which is why those who hold a liberal faith should not be too quick to abandon the Bible to the so-called 'fundamentalists'. It's not just that our understanding of the nature and meaning of scripture is at least *as* valid as theirs; it is also that when the religious extremists seek to justify their actions by an appeal to scripture, someone needs to be able to say that they have got it wrong – or, at least, that they cannot claim to be indisputably right!

If my colleague at that meeting was right about, 'increasing Talibanic tendencies', in some Christian denominations – meaning a shift towards dogmatism and dumbing-down – then it is all the more important that those who take a liberal position don't surrender the field. Instead, we should declare that the Spirit cannot be trapped in creeds, dogmas or even scriptures but, rather, moves within us – warming hearts to love and opening minds to truth, from wherever it may come.

*Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, Stacey International, 2nd edition, 1991.

**Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Vintage Books, 1996. First published in 1985.