

I recently chaired a meeting on the subject of 'music' in Ilford for the Three Faiths Forum. This may sound like a pretty routine affair and not one to attract great interest. However here you would be wrong. Music really does press the electrically charged wires together and a shock was certainly administered. Singing is fundamental to religion, and music is fundamental to Western culture, from the chants of monks, to Beethoven, through to modern popular music in all its guises. There are scores of radio stations dedicated to different tastes and music fills almost every TV moment. But if I were to tell you that according to the Koran music is forbidden, what would you say?

The reason for calling this particular meeting was the recent news that approximately 10% of Muslim parents are seeking to remove their children from music lessons in schools despite this being illegal. An Imam from Goodmayes, Sukheel Sharif, answered our questions on this subject.

He was intelligent and remarkably honest. Mr. Sharif confirmed that many Muslim parents were demanding that their children be removed from music lessons due to a majority view by Muslim scholars that music was forbidden. He pointed out that singing was not forbidden provided it was unaccompanied by music of any form. What was permitted was the chant of the muezzin who calls for prayer and the chanted reading of the Koran. I was unclear whether impromptu singing was possible to secular tunes. I imagine not.

There is a verse in the Koran that forbids music. Due to this verse anybody who takes his faith earnestly is required not to allow any music for themselves or their children. There is a minority who argue this verse away but Mr. Sharif was clear that he stood with the majority. Officially Islam requires an exact reading of the Koranic text and insists that despite the 1400 years that separate us from this chance reading, it is to be followed exactly the same today as in the Arabian desert of the 6th and 7th Centuries. There is no movement to the right or left. All culture that has developed since that date is firmly denied and rejected. This doesn't bode well for Muslims who wish to appreciate the culture in which they live, or those of us who have to share our land with many who do not.

Radical Islam is winning. With its rise particularly in Britain anything that withdraws a Muslim from the Western culture in which he lives is an opportunity not to be missed: - therefore remove children from music lessons, wear non Western clothing, oppose anything that smacks of a wrong against a Muslim land such as the containment of hostility by British troops in Afghanistan, and of course hate Israel. In a sense therefore there are two creeds to Radical Islam, hatred of the West and unbending adherence to a text 1400 years old and which cannot be altered in any respect.

I decided to put this to Mr. Sharif that being a Muslim frequently puts a man at odds with the culture in which he lives, even to the point of hatred of that culture. Mr. Sharif agreed that among many Muslims there is a refusal to accept the host country and indeed frequently a hatred of anything that belongs to it. I can't tell you how shocked I was to hear this confirmation. In fairness to Mr. Sharif, although he was opposed to music he said that he would not withdraw his children from music lessons although he would expect his children not to take part rather merely to passively observe. However the inference is clear: many people who live with us and have come due to our openhandedness, hate us and what we stand for despite receiving its benefits.

I have been involved in the East London Three Faiths Forum for nearly nine years and have been chairman for the last four. The position advocated by Mr. Sharif would not be held by all Muslims, and most I hope love Britain and its culture. However this other 'element' which is not small is

deeply inimical to what we stand for. It is also growing. It hates Britain. This is seen in an increasing number of Muslim women choosing to wear the Burka, the full black outfit with a small slit for the eyes, despite this being not required by the Koran. It is a sign of rejection.

Questions were posed to Mr. Sharif: what about Beethoven? No, that is forbidden. What about folk music? That is forbidden. Singing along to pop songs, listen to pop songs, forbidden. Obviously Muslim countries have a rich musical tradition too, one that I have myself appreciated when I have travelled to the Middle East. However the rise of radical Islam will obviously seek to quell this natural exuberance of other cultures too. I wouldn't be surprised if Muslim singers become the target of terrorist attacks in the coming years, for radical Islam knows only too well the road of violence to share with others its will concerning many matters.

As I write this article in July I have just read of a tale in the same month of a Indian Professor who used with his students a written piece of composition for analysis which unfortunately for him included a character called Mohammed. As an outrage against Islam this harmless professor was met outside, dragged from his car and had his hand cut off. This week as I write, so far, there have been in Baghdad 140 deaths caused by inter-Muslim violence, mainly Shia against Sunni. Three weeks ago there was a bombing in Pakistan which killed 50 and injured many more. The reason for the attack was the support of the Mayor and community for conciliation with moderate forces against the policy of violence sponsored by the Taliban. In June a Catholic Bishop in Turkey had his head cut off by his chauffeur who cried 'Allah Akbar' as he did so.

Is it not true to say that Islam has a serious problem with violence? Does not violence run through it as a major theme, and does not this worry us with so many Muslims who reject the British society in which they live. When the Pope alighted upon this in his Regensburg address of 2005 there was an outcry against him, an outcry with violence in which Christians were killed by Muslims, so that finally the Pope apologized to still the waters. The BBC and other networks have a policy of avoiding programmes critical of Islam although they are over prepared to have programmes critical of Christianity, because of the fear of violence. There was even a case where the Home Office intervened to stop a programme for fear of riots and deaths in England. Islam has a strong message, cross us and you will pay, and frequently with your life. Muslim converts to Christ are killed on a daily basis around the world, for that is another teaching in the Muslim Haddith which has a authority second only to the Koran.

There are many moderate Muslims who do not belong to this worrying strand. In fact of ordinary Muslims they are the vast majority. They sing, they value democratic institutions, and they value the freedom living in Britain has brought them. I think they need support and encouragement, so that their voice may dominate over those who reject Britain. And yet those who reject British society are so much more vocal and they comprise the majority of scholars of Islam. In an over tolerant Britain they have won the media battle to appear as 'The voice of Islam' and ordinary Muslims are being convinced too and joining them as they understandably seek to deepen their faith. Yet this strand of Islam is not appropriate to a free and open society. This 'majority' needs to be firmly distinguished from the real majority of Muslims who love Britain and honour her values. The security of these Islands depends upon it. Failure to do so is the height of irresponsibility.

The recent events in Switzerland and France in limiting the outward signs of in-your-face-Islam in relation to minarets and the burka are to my mind positive moves. We need to remember that not

all that goes under the title of Islam can co-exist with a free society. This is a message for Christians as well as to all those Muslims who live in British society in appreciation of its most cherished values.

Father Robert

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