ISLAM AND ASIA

by David B. Burrell

Of the many differences between Asia and the west, one of the more significant may be the little noted discrepancy in attitudes towards Islam. Denigrated in the west from early medieval times to the present day, Islam was welcomed in central, south and southeast Asia - all the way to Indonesia - by what the west reckons as the late medieval period. In the Asian subcontinent it was the stark contrast between Sufi preachers exemplifying the egalitarian fraternity of believers of which they spoke, and the rigid Hindu caste separation, which gave Islam its initial and continuing impulse. Mogul emperors, of course, could lord it over the people as much as any Ottoman would, but mass contact came through Sufi missionaries often revered by Hindu and Buddhist alike for their simplicity of life and manifest dedication to God.

In this way, Islam found itself adapting to local cultures, for Sufi masters generally had little regard for the separatist attitudes and disdain for kafirun (infidels) normally associated with official Islam. In this way it became one of the great religions of Asia - a continent of great religions, as the Conference of Asian Catholic bishops keeps reminding us. And faithful to their insight that Asia promises to be the place where Christianity will finally encounter these religions (in ways in which the western inspired missionary movement seldom did) so as to become the world-church of which Karl Rahner spoke so presciently, I shall contend that Asia offers the best opportunity for Christian exchange with Muslims as well.

The reasons are quite simple, and abundantly evident in the Islam one meets in different parts of Asia. Unlike the Middle East (aside from Egypt) and the maghreb (northwest Africa, e.g. Morocco), Muslims here have had to live among other religious bodies, so that mutual toleration has become a fact of life. Sufi universalism, moreover, according to which Adam, not Muhammad, was generally recognized as the first Sufi (responding "yea, verily" to Allah's query: "Am I not your Lord" [7:172]), gave a theological warrant for such toleration, so that the facts of shared living could be assimilated into the very mindset of these Muslim faithful. What assured, however, that the adaptation remained Islam? First, its touted simplicity (the so-called five pillars), and second, the orientation towards Mecca for daily prayer rendered in the language of the Qur'an. So whether it is understood or not, Arabic has continued to be revered among Asian Muslims as the language of divine revelation, itself providing a symbolic kibla (orientation) towards the Arab heartland.

Yet tensions remain between the respective Asian enculturations of Islam and its middle eastern keepers of orthodoxy. Not unlike the continual feuding between Sufi and mullah (the foil in subcontinent Muslim folk drama remains the mullah in his cap and garb), this tension has recently been exacerbated by propaganda funded from Saudi Arabia and Libya, which seeks to alter the customs of subcontinent Muslims, at least, towards a more "authentic" Islam. And since people brought up in a pir-murid (master-disciple) culture are often bookishly ignorant of Islam - however well-educated they might otherwise be - this propaganda has some chance of succeeding. Yet one rather suspects that the folk customs and their Sufi wisdom will prevail, and that the presumptive Arab hegemony over Islam will have to give way before an honest recognition that this great faith can embody many and diverse enculturations. (one has only to visit the spectacular and architecturally Chinese Niujie mosque in Beijing to feel the force of that contention: authentically Muslim, thoroughly Chinese.) Moreover, if Islam is but an Arab religion, it is hardly interesting. Hence the power of its different Asian embodiments.

Cultural rituals and folk customs, moreover, offer the most reliable indices to the way in which a religious faith holds its adherents. Pope John Paul II has seen this clearly with his emphasis on culture as a tool for social inquiry, often presented by him as a more subtle instrument of analysis than classical Marxist "class-struggle" scenarios. Viewed from this perspective, Asian Islam has had little hesitation in adopting local customs surrounding the three crucial turning points in human life: birth, marriage, and death. Since these

customs are invariably permeated by vestiges of earlier religious rituals, it was predictable that elements within Islam would resist such cultural adaptation from time to time. Yet such movements - to which we may compare what is commonly called "fundamentalism" today - have never prevailed over the underlying predilection for cultural identification.

Bangladesh and China each offer a case in point. Customs surrounding marriage in East Bengal are virtually indistinguishable, whether the contracting parties be Hindu or Muslim. Again, since the contractual exchange required by Islamic law is itself so spare in character, it is the surrounding rituals which tend to convey the sense of the event to those participating. While some Muslims, imbued with a wahhabi desert-like fervor, may resent such accretions and declaim against them, Muslim faithful find nothing untoward in celebrating as their neighbors do. And the simplest way to understand their situation is to forbear labelling these customs "Hindu" and accept the fact that they are Bengali, shared by Hindus, Muslims, and other believers in East Bengal, including Buddhists and Christians.

Similarly, in China, mosques have adopted "the Chinese temple style [while] Chinese Muslims are very fervent in the worship of their master's tombs" - perhaps "a heritage of ancestor worship" but also prevalent in the pir-murid culture of the subcontinent. Moreover, "music is sometimes played during their weddings, and at funerals the family [members] of the deceased are dressed in white and cry all the way after the coffin to the burial ground, all these being Chinese customary rituals" (Chen, 41). Around the turn of the century, a haji (Ma Guoyan) founded a sect called the Ikwani (i.e. "brothers" in Arabic) "to preach simpler rituals and strict observance of the teaching of the Qur'an" as he encountered it among the wahhabi in Mecca when he made the haji in 1888. Yet the main body of Chinese Muslims identify with the qadim (i.e. "old") believers, whose claim to being traditional is both their roots in the earliest transmission of Islam and their "conformity to Han traditional culture" (Chen, 42). Predictably, another Chinese sect arose during the same period (c.1900) to articulate in a more explicit way the manner in which Chinese Islam's development in the light of Confucian teachings represents an authentic enculturation (the Xidaotang sect). Finally, four Sufi orders (called menhuan, literally "noble family") can be identified in China, with various subgroupings.

What can we learn from so brief a survey? That Asia has been a fertile ground for Islam, and that Islam has been quite adept at conveying the "warning and guidance" given in the Qur'an through the vehicles

provided by local cultures. Since Christianity after Vatican II proposes a similar path of evangelization, the fruits of dialogue with Muslims should be obvious. And we also know that dialogue can assume different forms - discussion among articulate believers, which the term initially connotes, as well as the more common lived exchange among faithful as they pursue the tasks given them by their respective roles in society. It is here above all, in the quest for a just development in Asia, that different religious motivations may be seen to be complementary and reinforcing, rather than divisive. (A penetrating article by Wang Weifan entitled "Changes in Theological Thinking in the Church in China," published in the English language Chinese Theological Review [1986], provides a perspective rooted in China's experience of the past thirty years, which fleshes out the Asian Catholic bishops' notion of the "Kingdom of God" emerging in this continent in terms of this common pursuit.) Recalling the larger background of Asia and the west, Christians would do well to walk humbly in such a shared journey, for Christianity's very "success" in the west - in stark contrast with Islam - has not proven particularly advantageous for its penetration of Asia. Nor would it seem that inevitable identifications with "imperialism" can explain that fact completely. So the witness of Islam in Asia may well be something which we Christians should examine more closely as we move resolutely towards enculturation.

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