

# Introduction

If you want to know about Islam, then find a Muslim who is willing to explain the religion to you. On one level, this seems so obvious. It is a principle of basic enquiry: learn from the people who are most informed. And in the case of a religious tradition, the person most informed is the one who lives inside the tradition. Granted there are some Muslims who do not speak Arabic or do not know about the history of the Ottoman empire, but for understanding a religion – how it is lived – a Muslim is always better than a non-Muslim (even a non-Muslim scholar of Islam) and a Muslim scholar of Islam is probably best of all. With the latter, you get the perfect combination of learning with participation.

The academy has learnt this basic lesson the hard way. We now know that certain orientalists have given us a distorted image of Islam. And even at the more basic level: we know how Catholics distort the description of Protestant beliefs and vice versa. The Revd. Ian Paisley (a leading Unionist politician in northern Ireland), for example, is not the best person to ask if you want to understand the Roman Catholic Church; and Bishop John Shelby Spong (the most liberal Bishop in the Episcopal Church) is not the best person to explain the beliefs and worldview of evangelical Baptists. The problem in both cases (Paisley on Catholics and Spong on Baptists) is that the entrenched opposition makes it inevitable that distortions will occur. At the very least there will be an emphasis on certain elements that the opponent finds unattractive; but in addition it is likely that the interpretation will be distinctive. It is so often the case that opponents interpret this or that doctrine or idea in ways that the proponents of those doctrines do not recognize.

Naturally once one is informed about a different tradition, then there is an entitlement to comment. But this commentary is only permitted once one has understood a tradition in a way that the adherents of that tradition would recognize and appreciate.

So the basic principle that we seek to listen to the representatives of a position to explain their position has been established right across the academy. It is observed almost universally, save for one area: in America today the experts on Islam – the ‘experts’ that everyone in the academy reads – are the opponents.

The best example of this is the work of Daniel Pipes. Pipes’ books on Islam have become bestsellers. His *Militant Islam Reaches America* is typical. It is a vitriolic treatment of Islam that distorts, misrepresents, and therefore offers a faulty analysis of his subject matter.

Starting with the distortions and misrepresentations, Pipes complains that Muslims hope, trust, and strive for Islam to be the ‘dominant world religion’.<sup>1</sup> He speaks in apocalyptic terms about Islamic aspiration to convert America. So he writes:

There are three possible means to increase Muslim numbers to achieve this dream: immigration, reproduction, and conversion. Sensing that overwhelming the country with immigrants would provoke a backlash and that reproduction will take a long time, Islamists focus most of their efforts on conversion. Indeed they see converting Americans to Islam as the central fact of Muslim life in the United States. . . . Many Muslims attest to the sense of responsibility in their daily lives that comes from being an “ambassador for Islam,” always mindful of the importance of winning new adherents to Islam.<sup>2</sup>

The desire to convert is a natural human desire. Of course, Muslims would like to see more converts; this is also true of Roman Catholics and Evangelicals. This is part of the nature of Islam and Christianity; they both share a universal mission to the world. And plenty of political traditions are seeking to ‘convert’ the world to their worldview: friends of Israel – like Daniel Pipes – are trying to convert the world to support Zionism. And neo-conservatives in the United States are trying to promote their political commitments to capitalism and liberty. The fact that Muslims are the same is not a matter of fear or surprise; it is just inevitable.

Pipes does not simply distort the emphasis but then ignores the other half of the Islamic story. Islam, unlike Judaism and Christianity, has a Qur’anic obligation to respect Christians and Jews (e.g. sura 2:62). The Qur’an explicitly states that although God could have created one religious community, God did not do so (see sura 42:8). The diversity of religion is intended by God.

The faulty analysis generated by such distortions emerges when he identifies the three major Islamic responses to the dilemma and challenge of modernity. Pipes writes:

Muslims have developed three major responses: secularism; reformism; and fundamentalism. Secularism holds that Muslims can only advance by emulating the West. Yes, Islam is a valuable and esteemed legacy, but its public dimensions must be put aside so that it becomes a private faith. . . . Reformism, which offers a murky middle, is very popular. . . . [R]eformers reread the Islamic scriptures in a Western light. . . . Though intellectually bankrupt, this is politically very useful and explains why reformism is very widespread. The third response to the modern trauma is fundamentalism, also known as Islamism or militant Islam.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America*, (New York and London, W. W. Norton and Co 2002), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 6-7.

Pipes is an avowed secularist; he believes that ‘moderate Islam’ depends on opting for the first response. Religion must have nothing to do with society; it must be confined to the realm of the private. Pipes ignores totally the wholly legitimate complaint by Christians that this is undemocratic usurping of the public square by the secular agnostics. As Richard John Neuhaus famously argued, if the public square becomes a naked, value-free space, then the religious sensitivities of perhaps the majority of its citizens are being disregarded.<sup>4</sup> Granted minorities need protecting, but if a majority in a culture wants a certain shape and worldview in the public square then that is not necessarily a totalitarian aspiration. Pipes is adamant – anyone who wants to offer the wisdom of the Qur’an to the public square is a totalitarian. It is absurd for Pipes to write: ‘Seeing Islam as the basis of a political system touching every aspect of life, Islamists are totalitarian.’<sup>5</sup> For Pipes the only good Muslim is the secular Muslim. His hero is Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in Turkey; indeed aggressively secular Turkey is the model as far as Pipes is concerned. Pipes is deeply suspicious of any Muslim who is committed to his or her tradition. If we allow ourselves to be infected by the Pipes worldview, then perhaps we are in for a long, desperate battle between Islam and the West, which may indeed cost many thousands of lives.

This book is intended to be a corrective to the Pipes worldview. The book partly agrees with Pipes in two respects. First, Turkey has within its rich history a form of Islam that is committed to non-violence and constructive engagement with the West and with Christians and Jews. So Pipes is right to say that Turkey can provide a model, but that model is not located so much in its aggressive commitment to secularism. Second, there is a problem with militant Islam. But we need to be careful about who we identify with this militant Islam and the solution to it is not and cannot be to require all Muslims to become secular.

This collection of essays is an introduction to the Ottoman/Turkish thinker Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960), who was born in the Eastern Kurdish part of the Ottoman Empire. The themes of the book are grouped around ‘ethics’ and ‘globalization’. To treat these two topics properly, we will also have essays on non-violence and modernity. Each chapter looks at the thought of Said Nursi and explores an issue from a certain vantage point.

Said Nursi is an extremely significant Muslim thinker for several reasons. First, he is a mainstream, conservative Muslim. The temptation for non-Muslims is to find a liberal secular Muslim as a conversation partner. But the fact is that the majority of Muslims are not secular and liberal. Almost all Muslims believe that the Qur’an is infallible; the western tradition of ‘textual criticism’ has not developed and is unlikely to develop amongst mainstream Islam. Said Nursi is a mainstream Muslim: he believes that the Qur’an is the infallible Word of God. He believes that Muhammad is the final prophet of God. It is because of these basic commitments that the teaching of Nursi relates to other traditional Islamic traditions.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984).

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Pipes, *Militant Islam reaches America*, p. 39.

It is this that leads to the second reason why Nursi matters. His commitment to a constructive engagement with the West, coupled with a positive view of the conversation with Judaism and Christianity, arises from his commitment to mainstream Islam. He is an appropriate challenge to the widespread assumption that only liberal secular religious adherents are tolerant of diversity.

The third reason is that Nursi represents a form of Islam that is growing. M. Hakan Yavuz suggests that the ‘number of adherents of the *Nur* movement, known as Nurcular, varies between five and six million believers.’<sup>6</sup> Twice a week many of these believers meet in ‘Nurcu textual reading circles, known as *dershanes*’.<sup>7</sup> Currently there are approximately 5,500 such groups – all meeting to reflect on Said Nursi’s *magum opus* the *Risale-i Nur*. Given Nursi’s primary theme is the need for a deeper sense of Islam in the individual Muslim’s life, this is a powerful Islamic renewal movement.

The fourth reason is that Nursi had a strong commitment to non-violence. The distinguished Jesuit theologian Thomas Michel summarizes up this aspect of Nursi’s work very well, when he writes:

Said Nursi’s opposition to war as an inhumane and ultimately useless endeavor was highly controversial in his time, for in any nation all citizens are expected to support whatever wars are decided and carried out by their governments, and anyone opposing war is accused of being disloyal. ...Critics claimed that war against British and Italian incursions provided an opportunity to revive Islamic zeal and to assert the moral strength of the nation. They charged Said Nursi, who proposed prayers for peace and negotiated settlement as indirectly supporting the invaders’ aims. In response, Said Nursi held that he wanted release from the attacks of aggressors, but not by using the same methods which the attackers were employing. In other words, he rejected the practice of opposing force by force. Religion teaches people to seek truth and uprightness, not to try to achieve their aims by use of force.<sup>8</sup>

With Pipes presenting all traditional Muslims as potential Islamic militants determined to bring down the West, it is important that we know about this alternative stream.

Through this distinguished set of essays, the reader will discover the extraordinary world of Said Nursi. We are learning about Islam from a very distinguished Muslim. Naturally as one becomes informs, so one is then welcome to the table; we can join the conversation. So in this book one will find Islamic scholars are joined by Christians and a Jewish scholar to reflect on the nature of Islam and the particular achievement of Said Nursi.

---

<sup>6</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2003), p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Michel, S.J. *Reflections on Said Nursi’s Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding*, (Istanbul:Soz Bosim Yayin 2003), pp. 42-3.

It is not that non-Muslims should be silent; instead non-Muslims should simply accept the cardinal rule that participation depends on being informed. The rant of those who are seeking to create fear, misunderstanding, and hate must be resisted. Study of the thought and ethics of Said Nursi should be encouraged.

Ian Markham  
Ibrahim Ozdemir