KING'S

Theological
Review

ON CALLING ISLAM 'MEDIEVAL'

DAVID MARTIN

I place this letter by Francis Bennion at the beginning to illustrate the way in which the word 'medieval' can be used.

"Sir: Your report (16 December) of the Day of Muslim Solidarity reminds us that the death sentence against Salman Rushdie is for apostasy (change or denial of faith) rather than blasphemy.

Christian England once executed people for apostasy. The historian F.W. Maitland researched a case where in 1222 a church council at Oxford degraded and excommunicated a young deacon who had fallen in love with a Jewess. To please her he had circumcised himself, renounced the Christian faith, and become a Jew.

Like the Ayatollah, this medieval tribunal left it to others to execute the death sentence. The lovestruck deacon was delivered to the Sheriff of Oxfordshire, Fawkes de Breaute, whose men promptly burnt him alive.

Either of two conflicting conclusions can be drawn from all this. One is that the Muslims are still living in the Middle Ages, whereas Christians have become enlightened and liberal. The other is that the Muslims still care so deeply about their faith that they regard apostasy with genuine horror, while Christians have grown indifferent.

Either way, the civil law must be obeyed. Incitement to murder remains a grave criminal offence."

The Independent, December 19, 1989

The topic is difficult, even when conceived mainly in the framework of sociology. It is not made easier by my very partial acquaintance with Islam. However, I intend to proceed by offering my comments in the 'Notes towards' genre, and I intend to take risks rather than covering myself with the usual disciplines, back-door exits, and the academic 'maybe' and 'perhaps'.

In the recent controversy over Salmon Rushdies's *Satanic Verses* some liberals described Islam in general and Bradford Muslims in particular as 'medieval'. The term 'medieval' was not intended to be merely descriptive. It was intended to be descriptive/pejorative. One of the persons deploying the term 'medieval' was a colleague of mine in the sociology of religion who is a partisan of social evolution. Although social evolution has been much blown upon, it nevertheless has a habit of sticking around. It is kept available in the mental loft and exposed to domestic viewing on a selective and intermittent basis. Indeed, there are rules about when to expose one's private collection of disallowed attitudes to public view. Broadly one may not expose one's private social evolutionism when talking about simple societies. The word 'primitive' is definitely taboo, since it is linked with superior attitudes towards those held to be 'lower' in the scale of social organization.

However, discreet exposure *is* allowed when talking about religion. In this context religion is held to pass from an all-encompassing social condition to a marginal condition. This passage from comprehensiveness to marginality is generally part of an evolutionary framework, and one capable of being used predictively in that all societies are destined to travel along this road, give a contingent bump here and a contingent bump there, depending on local conditions.

At this point we enter a very doubtful area where all kinds of intellectual phantoms lurk, including philosophies of history, historical periodisation, concepts of phases, ages and stages, notions of progress, notions of convergence, as well as those prophecies of hope in which liberal democracy becomes universal or prophecies of doom in which it appears as a temporary episode. One of the most pervasive and substantial of these phantoms is called the entrance into modernity, signalled by industrial society. Ernest Gellner as philosopher and as anthropologist cum-sociologist is an advocate of this view. No matter about the variety of *origins* there is convergence of *destinies*, provided by modern industrial society. The world is going 'west', and Japan is the most obvious example of the far east going further west than the west itself.

Ernest Gellner is a bit unusual in making a lot of his public subscription to this view. I want to suggest that, disclaimers to the contrary, most of us are private subscribers. Certainly when it comes to a challenge of the kind posed by Bradford Muslims or the late Ayatollah, we respond in terms which indicate our private subscription. Certainly the public rhetoric of controversy is redolent of the contrast between modern and pre-modern, with the pre-modern being nothing more or less than backward, retarded and behind. Of course, that may also be underlined by the way we use words like 'fundamentalist' and 'superstitious' as tucked into the basic evolutionary contrast. No doubt we can use 'fundamentalist' descriptively, but more often it is tucked into the distinction provided by the contrast modern/pre-modern and the pejorative overtones attached to the lower/earlier of these two phases.

In the immediate vicinity of the contrast between modern and pre-modern is another binary opposition which also attracts a huge private subscription. This is the contrast between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, and the key notion here is the erosion of organic, all-encompassing community. Religion is the outward vesture and inner spring of community and the decline of religion runs *pari passu* with the decline of community. Of course, for the enlightened the decline of religion may be seen as pretty tolerable (while the decline of community is on the contrary moderately regrettable), but that does not need to be enquired into very far. The enlightened attitude amounts to seeing community at its most charming in folk-lore and folk dancing, and at its most menacing in the 17th century Salem of the witch trials.

The point to be emphasized here is the pre-eminent notion of the evolutionary passage to modernity and the background assumption that once-upon-a-time there was an all-embracing community which was based, for better or for worse, on an all-embracing religion. The old religious movements, like Islam and Christianity, were part of 'community', and community carries over, or 'leaks' into, the 'modern' period only on the *peripheries* of 'modern' society, like the Western Isles, *or* when migrants from under-developed parts of the world settle in the *centre* of modern society, *or* when small groups of mainly middle class youth are sucked into the enthusiasms of new religious movements or communes.

Note that there is a graduated scale of tolerance available for these leaks. The religious communities of the peripheries can be tolerated provided they do not attempt to discipline people like the Lord Chancellor or erupt into real politics like Mr. Paisley and the Catholic nationalists. The new religious movements are tolerable as private indulgences in (say) Vedanta or Yoga, but not as all encompassing claims made upon

mainly middle class youth. The migrants are tolerable provided their communitarian organization is viewed through the lens applicable to a racial minority. That is known as adding colour and variety, and is nice in the way folk-lore is nice. However, their communitarian organization becomes *intolerable* when it manifests itself as militant cultural defence carried out in the name of religion. At this point the enlightened go into a state of schizophrenia, publicly declaiming that Bangladeshis and Pakistanis are welcome in our muticultural society, and have a culture equal (if not superior) in its validity to our own, but privately muttering "Medieval Muslims go home if you can't behave yourselves". The matter can be put another way. The enlightened are cultural relativists, who show their liberalism by refusal to distinguish between cultures in terms of value, but who plainly emerge as partisans of western liberalism once the beneficent face of community reveals itself as the maleficent face of militant religiosity. At *that* point all the half-banished notions in the sociological and historical mental loft are allowed back into the conscious mind. And when that happens Islam can be roundly described as 'medieval'. Anathema can be met with anathema.

But why 'medieval'? Well, plainly 'primitive' will not do, since that summons up images of hunters and gatherers, and Muslims in Bradford or Karachi or Gaza Strip are not hunters and gatherers. 'Medieval' has various advantages. A kind of society described and/or dismissed as medieval can be seen as quintessentially communitarian specifically within the framework provided by militant religion. Of course, the charming elements of colour, and of guild-organisation, of stability, and craftsmanship, and close-knit relationship are all there, but they are conceptually subordinate to an unyielding, ecclesiastical organisation, to a social pressure excluding dissidents, to the unquestioning acceptance of sacred texts, and to superstition in general. In other words, the term previously used to describe and/or discuss *Catholicism* can be redeployed to discuss Islam. As Catholicism has improved under the beneficent impact of the passage to modernity, so Islam can move into the vacant place. Anathema once reserved for the Pope can be refurbished for the Ayatollah. And to show that these anathemas do not derive from an underground reservoir of racism, the anathemas can and should be used simultaneously against fundamentalist Protestants, who being often whites and certainly Christians are approved and allowable targets of unqualified liberal excoriation. (It doesn't matter that these fundamentalist *Protestants* are not remotely comparable to fundamentalist Muslims in their militancy and in their claims to subordinate the rest of society to sacred writ. The point is not accuracy but the establishment of liberal credentials).

So then, the most convenient term to characterise what is not yet modern and is defined by the specifically religious aspect of close-knit and closed communitarianism is 'medieval'. I would add that not the least convenient aspect of using 'medieval' is the way it avoids open evolutionism. Though it belongs to the general enlightened condemnation of a backward, dogmatic, and all-encompassing Catholicism, it is not implicated in the racial and social superiorities of the imperialist era. The natural resonance of 'medieval' is not of an evolutionary social phase but of historical periodisation.

One element in the complex of putative 'medieval' characteristics is not stressed, however. I have suggested that community as militant religiosity is condemned and community as social solidarity is applauded, even though the two may empirically support one another. But the element of honour

and shame is not much canvassed. In most pre-modern societies, medieval or otherwise, a man's identity is to a notion of his honour, especially the honour of his family. Insult is deadly and feuding endemic. Moreover, in certain versions of this, as for example, in Islam and Catholicism, the honour of person and family and social group is linked to the honour of the totemic signs which summarise the unity of the whole. Thus to insult the Virgin is to insult simultaneously all wives and womanhood and the honour of the whole group. To insult the wives of the Prophet is equally to impugn womanhood, all wives and the whole group. Liberal society, for all its proclaimed empathy with the presuppositions of other cultures, persists in treating those in its immediate vicinity as other versions of itself, though with a different colouring and providing different ethnic restaurants. It does not take on board the radical difference between its own form of social solidarity and the form of social solidarity with which it is confronted. What seems radically different is treated as contingent and can be dropped, religion for example. The real demand of liberal society, however, is for assimilation to the liberal norm in which religion is a matter of private variation and not socially and publicly constitutive.

Now, I do not want to be misunderstood. I have little sympathy with fundamentalist Islam and I have no wish to restore the all-embracing bonds and disciplines of community. True, I am interested in the paradoxes of liberalism, and believe it typically to involve many misunderstandings about the nature of social solidarity and individual choice, but I am not persuaded I should accept the demands of Muslims in Bradford about how *this* society should protect *their* honour.

I conclude with an observation. One is that insofar as new religious movements arouse opposition, they do so because they restore at the micro level what old religious movements maintain at the macro level. That is the head and front of their offence. Religion is basic, constitutive, and pervasive. It defines who is the brother and who is not, and its boundaries come as close as may be to the scope of community itself. There is a difference, however. In the case of the Muslim community the fact of being Muslim is prior and coincident with birth itself. The question of choice cannot rise and conversion if it should occur must mean leaving the community. And worse. All choices are exercised inside the prior fact of being Muslim. But in the social context of new religious movements the world of choice is defined as including choice of religion. It is precisely in that area that liberal society first established its concept of what was voluntary. As the individual is drawn into the commitments of the new religious movements, or in alternative language, sucked into the vortex of its totality, he appears to have lost just that voluntary aspect which liberalism defines as of the human essence. To that extent the spontaneous appearance of a new religious movement in liberal society is more distressing than the migration of an old religious movement. The new religious movement is a regression on the part of those who have already acquired what ought to be of the human essence: choice, and with that the centrality of the individual. The old religious movement, however, is the movement of persons from 'backward' societies into advanced society. They are not regressing. They are simply waiting a bit until they progress. Of course, if they don't progress one knows how to label their condition. They are still 'medieval'.

Perhaps the contrast can be dramatised in the following way. For Muslim society humanity is constituted by membership in the socio-religious totality of Islam, or, in a secondary

way by membership of its Jewish and Christian antecedents. For liberal society humanity is characterized by the ability to choose among ideological options separate from the fact of social belonging, and religion itself is conceived as an act of mature decision rather than of automatic membership. Of course, liberal society exaggerated the degree of choice which it offers as distinct from the acceptance of prior donations and givens, but its *differentia specifica* is the *idea* of mature option not inevitable donation. It, as it were, puts up with or elides the fact that most religion is passed on by the decision of *parents*.

To that I will add a postscript about Salman Rushdie himself, as existing between the one, the other, a hybrid. *Perhaps* – I speculate – the hybrid forgot his original habitat and so adjusted to his new ecological niche that the though he could tease the believers in his society just as his peers in England teased the Christian believers in their society. In England the believers had been taught to believe that the test of their faith was to grin and bear the teasing. If they didn't grin they were shown to be insecure by the 'light' of western psychology. Rushdie could help pass that lesson on from the west to the whole world, including the true believers in his original habitat and for that matter in England. He would be helping them forward, moving up a phase, out of darkness into light, out of the medieval into the modern. It was a sort of mission. Unfortunately, they – or some of them – had not learnt that putting up with teasing proved the maturity of their faith better than rubbing out the teaser.