

The Voice of Islam¹

by Dr. Jan H. Boer and Muhammad T. Ladan

During the Cold War, anyone who dared give a positive face to the rise of the Communist movement by relating it to their struggle to free the workers from oppression was running a grave risk of all kinds of suspicions and accusations. Saying anything positive about Communism at all was regarded by many as a betrayal of the fatherland. He might be vilified as a card-carrying Communist himself.

The same danger exists today with respect to Islam. If anyone were to provide any kind of positive rationale for which the perpetrators rammed into the New York buildings, he opens himself to serious suspicion and accusations. He may be thought to have terroristic tendencies himself! He just could be a card-carrying Muslim He might be regarded as short of the profound sorrow and deep anger the situation calls for.

May I assure you that none of these hold for me. I am hardly a terrorist, though my children in their earlier stages might have been inclined to challenge that disclaimer! I am certainly not a Muslim, though I have a deep regard for many aspects of Islam and high respect for many of its adherents. As to the appropriate emotions on September 11, I was as devastated as anyone and continue to mourn for the victims. I ask many questions about the kind of people that could plan such a cruel mission with such dedication over such a long time without showing any type of remorse. And I am extremely puzzled that so many Muslim communities throughout the world rejoice at this extreme violence.

But having said that, I will take the risk of these accusations and propose that, after all, there are some legitimate concerns that place these horrible events into a context with some sort of meaning. That rationale is the West's attempt to impose secularism on the world, including the world of Islam. By "secularism" I mean that perspective that confines religion to the spiritual and the private and renders it largely irrelevant for actual life. For over a century the West has exported secularism everywhere. It has done so through its colonial programmes, through its educational efforts abroad, through its corporations, through its "development" and "foreign

¹ This title is the title of an article by Muhammad T. Ladan in *The Pen*, Kano, Nigeria: Bureau for Islamic Propagation, February 27, 1989. The article itself is incorporated in this article you are now reading. CC, Nov. 26, 2001.

aid” programs, through its political missions abroad. In short, its entire style in Muslim countries has been secular and its message that of secularism.

I would like to be able to claim that Western missions have been an exception to this Western approach. Unfortunately, I cannot, especially not with respect to most Evangelical missions, those in the majority. The Reformed have generally had serious reservations with respect to Evangelicalism, precisely because it had bought into much of the secular inheritance of Western culture. A highly respected Reformed mission scholar, J.H. Bavinck, wrote decades ago that most missions failed to recognize their own secularism and its impact on their host societies. It is only the last couple of decades, since the fruits of secularism were becoming too obvious to ignore, that Evangelicals have begun to object to that perspective, but even then without always recognizing its source or nature. Evangelicals are now confessing their sins in this respect, but the damage has been done.

In all fairness, as a former Christian Reformed missionary, I must admit that the missionary arm of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) has absorbed much of that classic Evangelical perspective and is recently returning to a more wholistic approach only in its obedient adherence to Evangelical trends. However, Evangelical wholism is a watered-down version of the wholism of the Kuyperian tradition that has inspired so many articles in the *Christian Courier* over the years and that is paraded so often by Calvin College. The missionary emphasis has led to the development of Nigerian churches associated with the CRC that are no more wholistic than the churches that were born out of more openly Evangelical missions such as the Sudan Interior Mission. These CRC-related churches are now struggling with their ambiguous heritage.

The major thrust of my discussion is based on Nigerian experience and study, rather than Afghanistan or Pakistan or some Arab country, not quite at the centre of world attention at the moment. However, the Nigerian Muslim community is a typical microcosm of the Muslim world in its reactions to the West in general, to Western missions and to Christianity. So, though I am discussing a different continent, the issues are much the same. From here on, then, any reference to Muslims or Islam is to the Nigerian situation unless stated otherwise.

The Muslim community regards Western colonialism and the Western mission enterprise in the country as a single team with a single goal. That goal is to undermine and destroy Islam. It regards the Nigerian church as a mere outpost of Western interests and dominated by them. Referring to Christian members of a Constitutional Assembly held some years ago, one Muhammad Sadiq Abubakar wrote about how “evil” Europeans had determined that the sharia, the Muslim legal system, should be left out of the constitution as much as possible. Their intentions were to be carried out by the Christian members of the Assembly, who “were given

orders ... from their fathers, the European Christians.” The main personalities among the latter were identified as the Pope and the President of America.

The main weapon used to destroy Islam is identified by Muslims as secularism. Colonialists spread the virus of secularism throughout the country through the educational system all the way through university. In politics, opposition to the Muslim law, the sharia, on the part of Nigerian Christians, the lackeys of Western secularists, was only to be expected. Including the sharia would amount to embedding religion in politics, something that secularists want to avoid at all costs. So, it is only obvious to Muslims that the Nigerian Christian opposition to the sharia is part and parcel of the European plan to destroy Islam in Nigeria and, in fact, the world over.

Why do Muslims see secularism as such a threat? In short, to millions of Muslims, Fundamentalists as well as mainstreamers, Islam is the very opposite to secularism. The two are “antithetical” to each other, a term not infrequently used by them. They cannot exist side by side. Islam simply cannot tolerate it, for it constitutes a denial of their wholistic religion. While Islam parades itself as a comprehensive way of life covering all aspects of life, much like the Reformed at least used to do, secularism reduces religion to its private, personal dimension and kicks it out of the public square. Politics, economics, education, in short, everything in the secular system is deprived of a religious impulse and must be based solely on human reason. Muslims, on the other hand, seek to base their basic principles in all these areas from their basic source, the sharia. To them religion is everything.

Why is it that Christians have made relatively easy peace with secularism, while Muslims are so hostile to it? In fact, Muslim rejection of secularism has increased sharply under the influence of both Fundamentalism and the process of awakening from their colonial slumber. The reason for the difference is that secularism in the West did not represent an alien conqueror. It is a home-made product. It did not represent foreign invaders; it had local cultural roots. There was even some historical justification for it in the bloody religious wars in the West. For the Muslims, however, it was a tool of hostile invaders to subjugate them not only but to destroy their culture and religion. It has no roots in their culture. As they seek to free themselves from remaining colonial vestiges, they have come to recognize secularism as the root of many problems they face. It pushes the “manly” religion of Islam out of the public square where it rightly belongs into the limited sphere of mosque and private life. It was an attempt to modernize Muslim cultures and to help them enter into the 20th century. It was all based on the typical secular expectation that religion would one day vanish, shrivel up and die.

It is a Muslim conviction that secularism is responsible for most of the world’s ills. Think of anything negative or problematic in this world and secularism will be credited for its cause – imperialism, oppression, injustice, immorality, ecological problems. For this reason, Muslims are convinced that secularism cannot last forever. Allah cannot allow such a destructive force to

continue indefinitely. Hence, Muslims are sure that the West is doomed. It is only a matter of time before some calamity will overcome the West, especially its current leader, the USA. One writer, I.I. Bello, in an imaginary telephone discussion with President Bush Sr., wrote over a decade ago, back in 1989, "For us, at this end, it is clear that America is bound to a doom. Unless someone rescues it, no doubt in a few decades to come it will be wiped out of history."²

I want you to listen to the voice of another Nigerian, Muhammad Tawafiq Ladan, a Muslim who similarly represents the global Muslim community. I could have chosen many other writers, some much more recent ones. However, the article below, as was I.I. Bello's quoted above, was written 12 years ago. The warning he uttered has been repeated ever since time and again and yet the West has refused to take this warning seriously. September 11 was meant as a cruel shock treatment for the West to open its eyes and ears. The article below is not hindsight but foresight of more than a decade. The author did not know what type of an explosion would take place, but he was sure something would happen somewhere along the line, for the pressure had already been building up at that time. Amazing that it has not been heard and taken seriously.

If no one else, missions should have considered it their task to interpret these warnings and all that anger, but they occupied themselves by concentrating on planting churches, ignoring the anti-secularist message of their gospel. They thereby played right into the hands of the secularist agenda and almost totally marginalized themselves into irrelevance.

But perhaps Western failure to heed the warnings and understand the anger is not so amazing after all. Secularism, as Ladan writes, has always been peculiarly deaf and insensitive to religion. Religion was basically thought of as something we would outgrow in due time. While it is still with us, we must tolerate it but reduce its impact as much as possible by privatizing it.

North American Christians know something about that as well. Paul Marshall, formerly of the Institute for Christian Studies, in his book *Their Blood Cries Out*, complains bitterly that American secularists appear totally deaf to Christians. Secularists have built up an almost impregnable philosophical wall that has made it very difficult for them to take the Christian religion seriously. They have rendered themselves deaf and blind with their proud claims of neutrality and objectivity. Muslims have the same complaints.

Please read attentively the following article by Ladan, "The Voice of Islam." May I call it prophetic? I am aware, of course, of the total lack of self-criticism on the part of Ladan. One would never guess from the article that Muslim countries are not always shining examples of democracy, their claims notwithstanding. Few of us would want to trade countries or political

2 I.I. Bello, "Hello Bush." Same reference as above.

systems with them. It is also good to remember that Muslims condemn in others what they feel perfectly free to do themselves. They complain against the imposition of alien perspectives, but they arrogate to themselves the right, the duty even, of imposing Muslim perspectives on others. The English of the article may not always be acceptable to you. (**JOHN: Should you correct the English?**) However, try to ignore those elements and concentrate on the warning that Ladan and many fellow Muslim writers since then have been uttering. I have been working on a book to draw the world's attention to this warning. Alas, I have been too slow. But perhaps this time around the warnings will be taken more seriously so that policies and attitudes towards Muslims may change drastically from a narrow secularism to a more comprehensive approach that includes recognition of religion as a significant factor in all cultural affairs, particularly the religion of Islam.

Ladan's Warning

For many decades now Muslim voices of discontent have come only in the form of whispers, scarcely capable of being heard by secular regimes more readily to be attracted by voices which promise opportunities of self-aggrandisement and personal wealth. Secular regimes, themselves an alien imposition, have always displayed an astonishing ignorance of the people over whom they exercise control; and they almost invariably are capable (**JOHN: or incapable?**) of reading the signs on the wall, as such, signs are written it is such casual incident as student riots, or the more spectacular one as general uprising, comes to them as a surprise.

Perhaps there is sense to some interest in having regimes whose ears are more attuned to the melodies of secular life – with its infinite promises of worldly glory and sexual pleasures. And of the voices representing the more sober and weighty concerns of life, the servants of the world have no interest, or cannot indeed understand. Such regimes are therefore, as a rule, unstable, or in the language of Islam, they are merely like the webs the spider weaves. A government cannot be sustained by self-enrichment, self-glory and pleasures, and this is a matter known to all civilized people; but insecure regimes offer an advantage to some powerful nations.

And so it is that the deafening sound of secularism has prevented regime after regime from hearing the whispers of Muslims, the voice of a people who have a genuine cause to be aggrieved. Government policies and thinking have consistently assumed that Nigeria in its totality is secular and that people have accepted European civilization as their own. The logical inference of such assumptions is that Muslims do not exist, or if they do exist, they no longer believe in Islam as civilization and way of life.

To say that this is an unforgivable fallacy is indeed to understate the true state of affairs. Muslims have never failed to register their rejection of the imposed civilization; it is rather the secular regimes which have failed to understand the language of the Muslims.

For example, Muslims have relentlessly advocated a complete restoration of the sacred *sharia*; they have asked for a system of education based on Islamic principles for their children; they have affirmed so many times and in many ways that politics is an integral part of Islam, not separable from it. These for anyone imbued with clear insight amount to a rejection, albeit subtle, of the beliefs and traditions of secularism. Yet governments have chosen to ignore the Muslim voice. Instead, they tend to intensify propaganda aimed at convincing Muslims to abandon Islam and revert to unbelief; to abandon the *sharia* in favour of the imposed law, all in the name of Nigeria.

All that governments have achieved so far is merely to continue to add insult to injury. Certainly Muslims will continue to remain Muslims even if every house is turned into a radio station for propaganda. The reasons are obvious. Islam is a religion of conscience; it asks man to worship no one but his creator alone; to obey no one but the Absolute Supreme Authority; not to dehumanize himself by engaging in scandalous affluence and pleasure; to be committed absolutely to justice and fairness; and finally to always keep in mind the coming of the Ultimate Day in which, in the words of the Quran, **“You will be brought back to Allah, then every soul will be paid in full that which it has earned, and they will not be wronged.”**

Islam has its own laws, which because it flows precisely from their faith, Muslims find them natural to obey and apply. Islam is a civilization which throughout its history, has uplifted Muslims and made them masters. Above all, Islam gives meaning and purpose to life, far nobler, far more dignifying than the debasing and corrupting influence of secular life.

As a religion of conscience, Islam cannot but be concerned about the social and economic conditions of the people and government’s response to people’s fundamental needs. Serious-minded Muslims are certainly worried that the pillar of secular government exercise no sense of restraint and responsibility at all. At a time when the nation is overwhelmed by poverty and severe deprivation, they beautify their persons, magnify their glory, consolidate their “economic base” more energetically even as they send government functionaries to invade the homes of the poor, or waylay them on the highway to dispossess them in the name of taxation. Surely there is limit to unfairness and brazen insensitivity.

Nor will Islam be at ease in the face of continuous erosion of the supreme values of society. Television stations have refused to acknowledge their responsibility to society, even to the impressionable children, to whom we will eventually entrust this nation. Just to obtain money they put up advertisement, which even from their own personal judgement are offensive to the human conscience.

But more importantly to the nation, because it is of far reaching consequences, is the fact that secular rulers cannot offer practical examples of moral probity, honest, self-discipline, modesty and above all, sense of accountability for the rest of the people to emulate.

Now with the emergence of the Council of Ulama, the Muslim voice is no longer a whisper, it is being articulated and magnified, and the issues between Islam and secularism are being clarified. The secular regimes may decide to ignore this serious and, by all standards voice, trusting in its coercive power and tools of persuasion. But as long as Islam retains the unshakable loyalty of the conscience of the Muslims, it is the secular power that will have cause to blame itself for its deafness. The voice of Islam cannot be stilled.

JOHN: Be sure to indicate that the rest of the article is your writing again.

Communism can be considered a reaction to oppression of the workers in the Western world. Those responsible for that oppression must be held at least partially responsible for the horrors that Communism has unleashed. The sooner Bush realizes that, the sooner he might revoke the American ban against Cuba. Karl Barth, rightly or wrongly, is reported to have blamed Martin Luther and his followers for the horrors of Nazism because of Luther's two-kingdom theory that deprived German politics from a more Biblical impulse. I believe that we can call all supporters and adherents of secularism on the carpet with respect to the current anger in the heart of Islam and the subsequent recent explosion of that anger. That group includes hordes of Christians who have adhered to it partially, even missionaries. *September 11 is at least partially the result of the anger and frustration caused by a century or more of Western imposition of secularism on the Muslim World.*

Perhaps the dead victims of September 11 will be recognized in the future as victims in the struggle against the monster of secularism. Terrorists are monsters without doubt, but they are not the only monsters around! If the West, especially the leader, the USA, will heed this very concrete warning, then something good may yet come out of this unspeakable tragedy. What is needed, among other things, is a confession of guilt and a rejection of secularism as totally unreal and impossible, along with the recognition of the legitimate and real concerns of religion and spirituality beyond the "sphere of religion" and the private. There were already some serious literary and philosophical signs before September 11 that a turn in that direction has started, but it was only in the halls of academia. Hopefully this tragedy will serve to speed up the process by having brought it right down into the streets of the world where real life takes place.

It is not only the secularists in power who have to change course drastically in their relationship to the Muslim world; Christians need to change as well. The latter's flirtation with secularism has to end. A new and radically Biblical wholism is to infuse the Christian community that will

return religion back to the public square. The *Christian Courier* has over the years been inspired by the new-Calvinism that has been associated with the name Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper promoted a school of thought and action that is radically wholistic in its approach to the world in that it seeks to subject all of culture to the Lordship of Christ. Already this school of thought is gaining the attention of Christians in many countries who recognize it as a viable alternative to the watered-down version of Christianity that missionaries have bequeathed them. In the USA it is especially Charles Colson who waves Kuyper's *Stone Lectures* at many of his audiences as containing serious answers to the problems of America and its Christians. The Kuyperian alternative is the only version of Christianity that has such close wholistic parallels to the concerns of Muslims.

The words of John Vriend, a Canadian professional translator of Dutch Kuyperian classics, continue to echo in my heart when he hesitantly suggested that the 21st century may well become the real century of Kuyper. Now, in the midst of our current crisis, is the time for the heirs of Kuyper to stand up and be counted. It is the time for the alternative wholism of that tradition to be offered promptly and sincerely to Muslims, secularist and fellow Christians alike. This may be the day for which the Lord has called this tradition into being. Will the sleepy and somewhat embarrassed heirs of Kuyper please wake up from their slumber and hear the call of this desperate hour?