

Blame the Koran

The BBC Radio Four programme *Sunday* is usually of high quality, particularly when the presenter is Roger Bolton, as it was yesterday (17 July 2005). Yesterday's *Sunday* excelled itself in giving a clear account of the reasons for the 7/7 London bombings. Two Islamic scholars explained that the basic trouble is with the Koran itself (I prefer that old English spelling, rather than the BBC's fanciful Qur'an). Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra, an Imam in Leicester who is responsible for Mosque and community Affairs at the Muslim Council of Britain, and Professor Malise Ruthven, a leading writer on Islam, explained that some texts in the Koran appear to instruct believers to kill unbelievers. For example-

'But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them, and seize them, and beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem of war, but if they repent, and establish regular prayers and practise regular charity, then open the way for them.'

The problem lies in the complexity and textual confusion of the text known as the Koran. Every word of it cannot be taken literally, but needs to be interpreted by scholars. For example these hold that some apparently inflammatory texts applied only in the circumstances of a past era, and should not be regarded as current today.

In this the Koran resembles the texts assembled in what we know as the Holy Bible. Christians and Jews have to deal with what has been called the 'Dark Side of the Bible', for example God's instructions to Moses to kill every male of the Midianites. When the Israelites spared the children, Moses was ruthless. In Numbers, chapter 31, Moses says-

'Kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man by lying with him. But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him - keep alive for yourselves.'

The Roman Catholic Church used to hold, and to some extent still does today, that the Bible ought not to be put into the hands of lay persons because they are likely to misunderstand its texts. These need mediating by the knowledge only possessed by priests. The Church of England shared this view to some extent. What was known as the Higher Criticism (German inspired) was applied to biblical texts in the nineteenth century. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* says-

'The name *higher criticism* was first employed by the German Biblical scholar Eichhorn, in the second edition of his *Einleitung*, appearing in 1787. It is not, as supposed by some, an arrogant denomination, assuming superior wisdom, but it has come into use because this sort of criticism deals with the larger aspects of Bible study; viz., with the authorship, date, composition, and authority of whole books or large sections, as distinguished from the discussion of textual minutiae, which is the sphere of the lower, or textual, criticism.'

Those who carried out the suicide bombings in London on 7/7 appear to have believed they were acting in accordance with the Koran, and that they would be rewarded in Paradise. The two Muslim clerics on *Sunday* told us that they and militants like them misunderstand the true teaching of the Koran because, like the Bible, it can be correctly understood only by scholars who have spent years studying the whole subject. Even then there are doubts and arguments, as illustrated by the fact that modern Islam has warring sects such as the Sunnis and the Shi'ites. The latest is the Deobandi cult. According to Salman Rushdie (*The Times* 18 July 2005) the Taliban were trained in Deobandi madrassas. He goes on to say of the Deobandi cult: 'It teaches the most fundamentalist, narrow, puritan, rigid, oppressive version of Islam that exists anywhere in the world today.'