

Can Islam Learn from the Legacy of Martin Luther King Jr.?

Nahid Aslam

Muslim Women's Association of Edinburgh
c/o Annandale Street Mosque, Edinburgh

In October – November 2008, Concept, in collaboration with Queen Margaret University and Moray House School of Education, and with funding from the Centre for Sociology, Anthropology and Politics, organised a series of ‘critical ‘race’ dialogue’ workshops. There were two origins of these workshops. The first emerged through a Concept seminar in 2007 to discuss dilemmas faced by community education workers and university teachers relating to Islam and liberalism.

In Denmark several cartoons had recently been published depicting the prophet Mohammad in ways which a number of vocal Muslim organisations had vociferously condemned. The conflict had led in several countries to riots and deaths, and in the experience of several community education workers, growing Islamophobia and entrenchment of Muslim communities. In the more protected context of the university, an email debate had raged into the limits or otherwise of freedom of speech, the protection of religious minorities and the right to offend and be offended. The outcome of the Concept seminar was an expressed need for further informed debate about these issues and the possible changing nature of racism in our society.

A second source of inspiration for the critical ‘race’ dialogues was a Queen Margaret University undergraduate programme in Social Justice. Several courses had already been developed as collaborations between the university and campaigning organisations: Friends of the Earth Scotland and Scottish Women’s Aid. When developing a course in racial justice, there was some difficulty in identifying a willing collaborator from amongst the many anti-racist organisations in Scotland. During discussions with anti-racist activists it became clear that many organisations had declined in their capacity for campaigning as they had been drawn into delivering services to minority ethnic communities. In addition, several people reported an escalation in new and particularly vicious forms of racism which required responses for which they felt unprepared.

The critical ‘race’ dialogue workshops therefore aimed to resource anti-racism campaigners, community education workers and socially engaged academics, and focused on the themes of Images of ‘Race’; Islamophobia; Migration and Globalisation and Whiteness and Scottishness. Following the workshops, several themes emerged which participants thought would be useful to explore in more detail.

2008 was also the 40th anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King, and one debate emerged about whether his methods could be appropriately adopted by those tackling Islamophobia. Nahid Aslam, a Scottish Muslim active in a range of anti-racist, anti-Islamophobic and other social justice campaigns reflects on some of her research which was inspired by these discussions, and suggests that there is a wealth of resources for non-violent resistance within Islam, albeit not well known to Muslims .[Editor]

After participating in the critical 'race' dialogues, I agreed to write about Martin Luther King – that great Christian-American Civil Rights Activist of the 1960s – and say if Muslims can adopt his teachings to some degree and so may be help quash the rising tide of Islamophobia in the world today, particularly in the West. Not an easy task particularly since the Christian World view and the Islamic world view can often to be seen as radically different. Radically different? Do they not both preach peace and compassion? Of course they do, but there is a radical difference. That is the concept of 'Holy War' or 'Jihad'.

Whereas Jesus seems to be advocating pacifism when one reads passages such as that found in the Gospel of Matthew: "But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also." (Matthew 5:39).

The Qu'ran teaches 'Jihad' or fighting the enemy: "Fight in the way of Allah against those who fight against you, but begin not hostilities. Lo! Allah loves not aggressors". (Chapter2:190).

Muslims will say of their Christian brothers that Christianity is not a realistic religion for the world that we have today. The West, although claiming to be Christian, has so often gone against the very teachings of Christ in its dealings with the world. For example: the phenomenon of Imperialism. The Church and Christians have 'allowed' or even encouraged their 'leaders' (industrialists and government) to invade Eastern lands for natural resources, thus benefiting the whole nation, including the Church.

Thus, it is acceptable in their eyes, say Muslims, to fight against corrupt 'Christians'.

The term 'Islamophobia' made its way into the English language around the 1980s. It is defined as 'dread or hatred of Islam' and by extension, to the fear and dislike of all Muslims. It also refers to the practice of discriminating against Muslims by excluding them from the economic, social, and public life of a nation. In this sense it is similar to the discrimination meted out to the African-American Communities of the USA which led to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the activist work of people like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Malcolm X, as a converted Muslim, was heavily influenced by the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. Elijah believed that White America actively strove to keep Blacks from realizing their potential in the political, social, and economic arenas and that they would be unwilling to share these arenas with them. Hence he believed the only way forward was for the 'National of Islam' to create its own separate State for Blacks, independent of White society.

The Baptist Minister, King, on the other hand was influenced by the reconciliatory teachings of Christ such as 'turning the other cheek', and hoped that one day Blacks would be able to share the social and economic opportunities that Whites had. In his famous speech "I Have a Dream", King stated that he dreamed of a day when the sons of former slaves and sons of former slave-owners would be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood and that a day would come when Black people would be judged not by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.

King was heavily influenced by the teachings of Mohandas K Gandhi aka Mahatma Gandhi, the Civil Rights activist from India who helped lead Indians towards independence from Britain in the 1940s. Gandhi took his inspiration from sacred texts such as the Bhagavad-Gita but also the Bible. In particular, he was heavily inspired by the 'Sermon on the Mount' teachings.

In a reported conversation between him and Britain's viceroy of India, Lord Irwin asked Gandhi what he thought would solve the problems between Great Britain and India at that time. Gandhi picked up a Bible and opened it to the fifth chapter of Matthew and said: "When your country and mine shall get together on the teachings laid down by Christ in this Sermon on the Mount, we shall have solved the problems not only of our countries but those of the whole world."¹ It seems quite clear that although Lord Irwin – a Christian – was not following, or indeed did not have knowledge of his own prophet's teachings. If he did, he would certainly not have been carrying out the bidding of the British Empire by oppressing the Indians and allowing their natural resources to be taken away from them.

King and Malcolm X can be seen as the two differencing faces of Muslims resident in the West at this current time. Martin Luther King was a strong advocate for integration while Malcolm X believed in separation. In the West today there are Muslims who want to convert Europe to Islam yet there are also those who appreciate diversity and respect all faiths and traditions.

The question of a Muslim Gandhi has been posed on many occasions. King as a Christian was influenced by Gandhi, a Hindu. Why have seemingly no Muslim activists fighting imperial oppression been influenced by Gandhi's teachings of '*Ahimsa*' or non-violent resistance? There are after all plenty of examples of violent forms of resistance to oppressive State control in the West!

On the face of it, it seems that many Muslims born and brought up in the West know more about Gandhi than any freedom fighter in their own countries of origin. While writing for this article I conducted a short questionnaire which was put out to the membership of the Muslim Women's Association of Edinburgh. I asked them if they had heard of the Indian - Mohandas K Gandhi and the Sudanese – Mahmoud Mohammad Taha – and if so what did they know about these two men. Most of those who replied, and who had their secondary schooling in this country, stated that they had heard of Gandhi but not of Taha. This is not surprising since at school in Britain, pupils are taught about Gandhi in subjects such as Religious Studies and History, while Taha or any other Muslim Activist for Justice is hardly ever mentioned.

The Western Established Order, it seems to me, has an aversion to portraying Islam as a religion of peace and justice. It would much rather show Muslims acting barbarically – oppressing women, training child soldiers, blowing up State infrastructure, etc – than showing them working to create a better, fairer system for all.

¹ <http://www.2006torino.org/sermon>

Yet, if one looks outside of the West and into the Muslim World there are examples of individuals who have advocated peaceful resistance to oppressive regimes. One such person is Mahmoud Muhammad Taha (b. 1909), founder of the Sudanese Republican Party.

Taha was active against the struggle for Sudanese independence from the British. Afterwards he continued his struggle for justice against the Sudanese ruling elites, particularly when they tried to impose Shariah law on his country. Sudan has a large Christian and 'pagan' population living within its borders and he believed that applying Sharia Law would invite the distrust and animosity of these Sudanese citizens. This he felt was contrary to real Islam as he understood it.

Taha made a distinction between the early teachings of the prophet Mohammad in Mecca and the later teachings after he had been expelled to Medina and established a city state. Mohammad's instructions in the context of resistance were nonviolent and quite different from those in the context of governance and control. He was put to death on Friday 18th January 1985 by the Islamic judiciary who accused him of holding unorthodox views of Islam and so feared that he could cause widespread dissention.

He could have escaped execution by fleeing Sudan, yet Taha faced death with remarkable courage and serenity believing that submission to the will of God was the essence of Islam and that one should endeavour to achieve such submission in every aspect of ones private and public life. He often told his disciples to see the hand of the original actor, God, behind that of the apparent actor or immediate cause of the event or incident. For many Sudanese, and perhaps one day to the world at large, when Taha's life and work are fully appreciated, the events of that fateful Friday will be the most eloquent testimony of his extraordinary moral stature².

Another example of non-violent alternatives of Islamic political resistance is that of Addul Ghaffar Khan a mid-twentieth-century Pashtun of the Northwest Frontier Region of what is now Pakistan. The very area where civil war has taken hold and the Taliban seem to be in control.

Khan has been called the "Frontier Gandhi". He rejected the 'Islamic' concept of 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' blood feud that is so often commonplace in Pashtun-Islamic communities, and the belligerent Pashtun tribal code. Instead he accepted a non-violent interpretation of Islam. Khan was heavily influenced by Mohandas K. Gandhi, and came to interpret the heart of Islam, including the concepts of jihad, as essentially about peace, service, and non-violence. Khan travelled widely in the frontier region that later became Pakistan, and his most significant achievement was to raise a non-violent army of Khudai Khidmatgars or "Servants of God" from his own Pashtun people³. It is unfortunate that

² The Republican Thought. www.alfikra.org/index_e.php

³ Abdul Ghaffar Khan: An Islamic Gandhi by James L. Rowell

Pakistan's education system does not give him much time, yet his legacy does remain within pockets of Pushtun communities living in the West, if not in Pakistan.

The history of Islam and the West has been one of conflict and plunder. Many Muslim homelands have felt the hand of Western oppression and continue to do so. Western-educated Muslim Youth are taught this history in their community centres and mosques, from the internet and each other. Feelings of anger and frustration naturally build up. Yet if King, Taha and Khan were alive today they would beseech Muslim Youth, as they did their communities, not to be consumed with feelings of bitterness and hatred, but rather to conduct themselves with dignity and discipline in their struggle for Justice.

The Sermon on the Mount reaches to the heart of all those that are striving for justice whether they be Christian, Muslim, Hindu or of no religion at all. In particular the following two verses: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven". (Matthew 5:1).

Which is why Whites joined Blacks, religious people joined non religious people during the St Andrew's Day Anti-Racism March and Rally which takes place each November in Glasgow. A March which calls for a Scotland which is free from the fear of discrimination, prejudice and racism for everyone.

In his 'Beyond Vietnam' speech Martin Luther King reminded his audience of the power of Love. He said, "Loveis the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality. This Hindu-Moslem-Christian-Jewish-Buddhist belief about ultimate reality is beautifully summed up in the first epistle of John in the Bible: Let us love one another; for love is God and everyone that loves is born of God and knows God. He that does not love, does not know God; for God is love. If we love one another God dwells in us, and his love is perfected in us". 4

Hence my answer to the title question is that Islam has learnt from Martin Luther King Jr. However we need to keep reminding ourselves and others of his teachings as we go about our business in a world that so often encourages our selfish desires to flow out rather than our auspicious ones. Otherwise his legacy can be so easily forgotten.

4 Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence, by Rev. Martin Luther King . 4 April 1967

<http://www.ssc.msu.edu/~sw/mlk/brkslnc.htm>