

A TIME FOR HONESTY

IN HIS LATEST MISSIVE ON ISLAM, LORD CAREY WARNS THAT WITHOUT MORE FORTHRIGHT DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS, THE WORLD WAS "IN GREAT PERIL" OF FALLING INTO A NIGHTMARISH CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS. YAHYA BIRT REPORTS.



Carey argued that suicide bombing could never be justified morally, despite deep humiliation, and warned that without clear leadership from moderates, the reputation of Islam was in danger.

At an address, "Islam and the West: The Challenge for the Human Family", held at the University of Leicester on 12th May, the former Archbishop of Canterbury argued that urgent steps were needed to tackle both rising Islamophobia in the West and anti-West sentiments in the Muslim world that were on the increase, with heightening tensions over Iraq and unilateralist US-Israeli policy over Palestine. Lord Carey reiterated the point made in his Rome speech in March that authoritarianism in Muslim societies had stifled democracy and intellectual development and had encouraged the mistreatment of minorities, but added that he did not believe these problems to be intrinsic to Islam itself.

Carey qualified his earlier charge of inadequate Muslim condemnation of terrorism to say that he was directing it at Muslims in the Middle East and not British Muslims. He argued that suicide bombing could never be justified morally, despite deep humiliation, and warned that without clear leadership from moderates, the reputation of Islam was in danger.

Yet for Carey the recent abuse of Iraqi prisoners by coalition forces shows that the West does not stand on the moral high ground. Instead, along with honesty, what is needed is humility and an urge to listen to and learn from both parties.

One prominent Leicester Muslim commented afterwards that Carey had fallen into a trap, common in interfaith dialogue, of making easy moral equivalences without paying true regard to the great inequalities that bedevil Islam-West relations. Idealistic convocations of the great and the good will do little without gritty, realistic and fair diplomacy that empowers ordinary Muslims and allows them to recover lost dignity. Only then will intractable conflicts in the Muslim world, and the terror that they spawn, be healed.

Liberals within the Church of England will perhaps see this as a partial climb down on the part of the Evangelical wing, with whom Lord Carey has some sympathies, as the more robust Rome speech, if not as one-sided as portrayed in the press, was effectively arguing for an end to the highly diplomatic style of interfaith dialogue that is currently in favour with Lambeth Palace. In its place, it seems that the Evangelical wing

would like to mount robust campaigns against Islamic extremism and the mistreatment of Christian minorities, as was shown by Lord Carey's visit to Sudan's beleaguered Christian south in 2000. In short, some evangelicals believe the Church should not hold itself back for fear of fanning the flames of Islamophobia directed against Britain's already embattled Muslims.

But this inconclusive intervention seems unlikely to alter radically the final deliberations of a three-year Muslim-Christian listening group set up to assess the feasibility, role and structure of a proposed Council of Christians and Muslims, which Carey initiated and that has the full Support of the Church's establishment.

The group reports this in the summer of 2004, and if established in an amenable form, the CCM will formalise decades of grassroots interfaith work. Against this backdrop, Lord Carey's call for "ethical co-action" is likely to be much more practica-