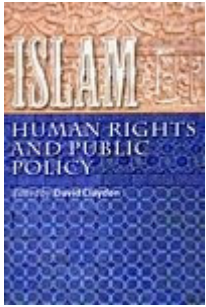


Review: Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy



I was handed a copy of *Islam, Human Rights and Public Policy* by my Bishop, John Harrower, who is one of the contributors to this book. I came to the book as one who is aware only in general terms of the values of Islam and the application of Islamic religion and spirituality in the public sphere. This book informs, clarifies, warns, exhorts.

The book is far from some Christian compendium of anti-Muslim tracts. The contributors are respected, studious, academic, serious leaders. None of them promulgate a phobic line that is sometimes used elsewhere; there is no emotive placing of Christianity as a victim in a crusade-like framework where the Kingdom of God is threatened by hordes of heathen. Rather here is genuine concern about society in general, not just the Christian church. It is an apology for pluralism – but pluralism done well, in freedom.

Peter Day catches the program somewhat in his chapter, *Australian Public Policy: Examining the Foundations*:

“It should be clear that excessive Islamophobia is a poor foundation for the development of public policy in any field. And it is an especially poor foundation for the development of the sound knowledge bases... on which sound policy ultimately depends.” (page 27)

This book gave me new awareness of aspects of Islam. An example of this is *dhimmitude* – the tolerance of non-Muslims allowed to live (as *dhimmi*) in subjugation to Muslims. Mark Durie applies it by considering the tendency of Western tolerance to unquestioningly affirm all spiritualities.

“This is not a healthy way to engage with Islam for those living in liberal democracies. It establishes a framework in which Islam takes on the role of a dominator that expects to be praised and admired. The reaction to deserved criticism, when it manages to find a voice, can be shock, denial and outrage.” (page 34)

The exposition of the subtleties of *sharia* law were also worthwhile. The apostasy laws, preventing a Muslim from converting to another religion on pain of severe punishment including death are often cited (amongst other things) as an indicator of the “fundamental areas of conflict between Islamic law and Western democratic human rights” (page 66).

A common conclusion was that even partial recognition of *sharia* within secular society is unhelpful. Abdallah Bahri shows in his chapter on *Aspects of Sharia Introduced into Non-Islamic States* how concepts of religious freedom and human rights are being undermined because the end-game of *Sharia* is always towards a “complete way of life.”

“Many Muslim leaders teach that humanly determined laws are not God’s laws and therefore do not need to be obeyed.” (Page 184)

“It is this complete way of life that is embodied in the Sharia. It prescribes everything from the personal and the family to the state level.” (page 185)

And finally the concept of *da’wa*, or “invitation”, which is often portrayed as the “real” face of Islam as opposed to *jihād* – persuasion or invitation instead of coercion or force. Paul Stenhouse argues that *da’wa* is “*Jihad* with a Velvet Glove” and warns about being

“deceived, as many in the West are deceived, into thinking that abandonment of overt violence means abandonment of the

goals of violence... a change of policy, not a change of heart... Through da'wa it hopes to achieve by stealth what will ultimately prove to be unattainable by brute force." (pages 222, 224)

Bishop John's chapter, *Religious Policy, Multi-Faith Dialogue, and Australian Values* looks at the difficulties of the engagement with Islam in "multi-faith" conversations. He notes that the tendency of Government to "promote multi-faith dialogue as a means of developing a spirit of harmony" rests on certain assumptions, and

"Where one or more of these assumptions are not agreed to by the proposed participants, the resultant 'dialogue' becomes an opportunity for advocacy of one's own world view and the dialogue makes no contribution towards a spirit of harmony... Experience in interfaith dialogue has shown to date that the attempt to develop harmony through dialogue is an idealist's hope that is not often realised." (page 247)

This is a worthy recognition of the tendency in Western society to insist that religion submit to a pseudo "civic religion" empty of all diversity or proclamation. Bishop John puts forward a better framework.

"Public policy on promoting harmony should be pursued in the context of promoting the nation's values, rather than requesting discussions between religious groups... The religious context carries with it, inevitably, an agenda for advocacy and the need to protect one's doctrinal position. What can be encouraged, however, is a secular dialogue on values." (pages 251-252)

This book isn't a wrestle or a debate. The issues are *handled* but not *grappled* with in the sense that there is very little to-and-fro, exhortation, rebuttal, response. It is primarily

educated opinion and observation.

Therefore, the value is for us who have not had the opportunity or the insight to observe these things about Islam or consider them in that way. The things noted are real, relevant and will become increasingly so in the future as worlds collide. It motivates myself, for one, to be further applied to the teaching of Biblical truth that it may find many voices in times ahead.