**Two Stonings and a Beheading – Witnessing Islamic Justice**

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Attending public executions, whether beheadings or stonings, is not my predilection, yet one does come across them in the course of life in Arabia and Pakistan. Beheading and stoning are the accepted penalties for a range of presumed offences in much of the Muslim world, and the all-male crowd — especially the old men — push and shove outside Riyadh’s main mosque after Friday morning prayer for a better view of offenders losing their heads by the ceremonial sword. The seeping cadavers and their heads are left on the tarmac pour encourager les autres.

Further east, outside a much smaller mosque in the desert near Hofuf, the miscreants were two women making their living by harlotry, and hence adulterers, due to be judicially stoned after the amplified rant from the imam. The mosque had been selected as a venue I think because it had no concrete forecourt. It had therefore been possible to scoop mechanically two neat holes in the ground, each lined with an open-topped oil drum.

Let me quote from my notes. It was again a Friday, the holy day. ‘There must have been 60 or 70 cars and a couple of hundred people, some perched on the car bonnets, and four or five police cars, blue and white, and a police van with a pulsing beacon beyond the crowd. A proclamation was now being read out, flat and deadly, the reader having difficulty with a name. The head and shoulders of one binte were already sticking out of one of the holes. Just then two policemen were lifting the other from where the van was and inserting her, carefully, into the other hole. She was trussed in some manner, arms down the side of her, in leg-irons probably.

‘I couldn’t spot where the first rock came from — maybe from the mutaween, the religious police, “upholders of virtue and stoppers of sin’’, identifiable by their beards. The uniformed police, lined up, were busy throwing rocks. A tipper truck had brought up a load of Type Two aggregate of red sandstone from the road-building being undertaken by my companion’s construction company, and dumped in two heaps for those without sin to fling at the women under their shrouds. The targets could not of course duck down into their holes: they were too narrow.’

Well, that was and is the law out there, and the practice. Stoning for adultery was Moses’ law too, but the Jews haven’t practised it for a couple of millennia or so, as far as I know, just as we have given up burning our apostates. The merit of stoning, like the firing squad, is that one can’t ascribe the killing to a given individual.

Over in Pakistan last week, the stoning to death of Farzana Parveen, married and pregnant, wasn’t the result of a formal legal indictment even though it was taking place in the open space in front of the High Court in Lahore, that most sophisticated of Pakistan’s cities. It was done, it seems, mostly by her own family at the behest of her father, who regarded as adultery his daughter’s marriage to a man other than the one he had chosen. Here the police didn’t participate in the stone-throwing, but just stood and watched, together with a chance assembly of lawyers and passers-by.

The act of stoning, while not actually lawful in Pakistan, was done in what is called a ‘climate of impunity’ in the rigorous Islamic tradition of daughters marrying who they’re told to, and in the light of the awareness of several hundred other such killings in Pakistan every year going unpunished.

This time, however, someone took a smartphone clip of what was going on; the wide world saw it, and gulped. After a pause of days, and international outcry, the Prime Minister of Pakistan sniffed his disapproval, and one or two family members have since been taken into custody.

But in truth the western world’s railings against honour killings, death sentences for apostates, murderous fatwas, clitorectomy, Islamism in all its manifestations from al-Qa’eda to Boko Haram, are virtually nowhere echoed in the Islamic world itself. Good citizens of Muslim allegiance and vaguely moderating organisations like the Muslim Council of Britain are called in to the media microphones to distance ‘true’ Islam from the categories of barbarism. But they are a tiny western-dwelling elite, living in a part of the world informed for a couple of thousand years by the values of Hellenism and Judaeo-Christianity. They are profoundly alien to the Muslim world.

Out there, no hierarchies exist beyond the (Shiite) ayatollahs of Iran to speak for ‘Islam’. There are no essentially spiritual leaders acknowledged, no popes or Canterbury archbishops, moderators, orthodox patriarchs and the like to speak comparably for the bodies of Muslim adherents, or collectively guide them. For there is today no perceptible yeast of contemporary Islamic theology, no debate, and hence no effective mechanism of change and evolution so as to allow this religion to play a coherent part in the world as it is today. Debate is not allowed, and has not been allowed for centuries.

The phenomenon of Islam, meaning submission, deriving from Bedouin-adapted half-heard Hebrew stories, spread its rule by sword and skill with astonishing rapidity across the southern Mediterranean littoral and Levant, from southern Spain to Baghdad, from the 7th century ad. It was at that time tolerant and inclusive of the cultures and faiths it overran, and rich in ideas, techniques, art and learning. But Islam was undermined in the Islamic Caliphate in Baghdad when the tolerant, outreaching mutazilim regime under the caliph al-Mamun was swept aside by the Hanbali diehards and their fellow-travellers. This was as early as the 9th century. By 848 ad, progressive Islam was doomed.

Today in its heartland, Sufism is outlawed together with satellite dishes; women are deemed created too inadequate to drive a car; rote-parroting of the Koran is the route to understanding eternal truth; and the Creator of the Universe is deemed to judge righteousness by what a person eats or drinks. You do not think for yourself. Obscurantism rules.

Islam knows it is under siege by an unconquerable and incomprehensible prevailing global zeitgeist. When Islam burns churches in Alexandria, Baghdad, or Pakistan, it is because it fears them.

Here is my cue to declare that among my dearest friends I number certain Muslims. But either they are Sufis, with whom I share soul, or we stick to the secular in our range of thought. Secularity or spiritual insight may prove the ultimate keys.

When I picked up that sight on screen of Farzana’s death by stoning on 27 May, my mind went at once to the martyrdom by the same method of Stephen, celebrated in the Christian calendar, at the hands of diehard Jewry for proclaiming their recently crucified countryman, Jesus, the Messiah. That mob then laid their coats at the feet of a young zealot named Saul, who approved the killing.

Saul was to become that Paul to whom we owe so much and who was himself to be martyred. And I venture that the greater world’s reconciliation with Islam will be achieved in truth only by that same route taken by the figure at the scene of St Stephen’s death: by love, example, eternal patience, and I daresay conversion and the grace of God.