

At the joint NASACRE / AEREIAC Conference on Mon 6 Mar 2017 'Religions are not Monoliths' we were treated to two valuably informative keynote presentations provided by Dr Abdullah Trevathan talking about 'classical' Islam in contrast to 'modernist' Islam and the Revd Robert Reiss talking about 'liberal' Christianity. As a taster of what was said extracts from Dr Abdullah Trevathan's presentation are provided below.

Dr Abdullah Trevathan on 'classical' Islam

"What is suggested in the conference title sub-heading is based on a dichotomy between 'liberal' and 'conservative' wings of different religions. That is perfectly understandable. I'm not sure that works when it applies to the Muslim case. It is very confusing I think for outsiders so I'll try and shed a little bit of light on that. What we have here is the 'classical' vs. the 'modernist' position."



Dr Abdullah Trevathan
The Director of Al-Akhawayn
School in Morocco

"I've mentioned 'classical' several times already. I need to specify what I mean. The 'classical' position is the position of accumulated wisdom of over fourteen hundred years by various schools of thought, which I'm sure you've heard of. There is the 'Madhab' which is the accumulated thought and interpretation of both the Qur'an and also the Hadith. It is the 'classical' position which has the flexibility, the intelligence, and the adaptability to be functional in the Muslim world and it is this aspect of Islam where it is possible to have dialogue with other people of faith or not."

"The 'modernist' position, I'm talking here in the historical sense, is something that developed something like 250 years ago in different movements that developed in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and India which were reformist movements. Reform within Islam is actually not a concept because we



will see that the application of principles are constantly updating the situation. So the idea that Islam has deviated and that stricter interpretation of Muslim laws, not Muslim belief or mysticism but strict adherence to Muslim laws was accentuated. We will go a little more into that later. It is the 'modernist' tendency that you are finding all over the world."

"The confusing thing is that we tend to think, or the outside tends to think of the 'classic' position as being traditionalist. They are the people who are situated in out dated modes of thought, etc, etc., those who declare those who leave Islam as apostates, you know, Isis in the minds of many are people who are implementing a medieval perception of Islam. Whereas in fact it is the other way round. It is actually the 'modernists' who are taking on very inappropriate perspectives. The 'classical' has been able to, because it is classic, it has been able to adapt to the situation and where

it hasn't it has failed and is replaced by something else but not in terms of reform movements. My own particular position so you know, the Sunni 'classical' orthodoxy but also the Shia 'classical' orthodoxy. I don't think I have the wherewithal to put forward facts and ideas from within that tradition but much of what I say here will be applicable in general terms also to the Shia 'classical' orthodoxy. Also Shi'ism has not had the same 'modernist' tendencies within their ranks so it is not quite the same."

"Within the Muslim world the three main areas of contention where all the problems came from - we can actually link it to a particular battle, the Battle of Siffin in 657CE twenty-five years after the death of the Prophet when a group of people departed from the ranks of Ali. Ali was the cousin of the Prophet. From this came an interpretation of Islam which was anyone who sinned once was out of Islam forever and their 'blood was halal' was the chilling phrase they used. They are called the 'Khawarij' meaning the 'people who left'. The Khawarij tendencies are still alive today and they tend to hold a literal interpretation of the Qur'an."



The Battle of Siffin

At the Battle of Siffin fought on the 26 July 657CE troops led by Caliph Ali ibn Abu Talib clashed with troops led by Muawiyah.

"From the Khawarij emerged the main areas of contention, the first of which arose within what is called is called 'aqidah' which means or doctrine. A good example of this is an argument which has continued throughout the ages, 'Does God have a face or a hand?' as various verses in the Qur'an refer to this, for example, 'Wherever you turn there is the face of God' (Qur'an 2:115) and 'The Hand of Allah is above their hands' (Qur'an 48:10). So the question is 'Does God have a face?' The Khawarij's literal interpretation of this is that if the Qur'an says he has a hand - he literally has a hand. The 'classical' interpretation of this is, God meant whatever he meant and it is not for us to question. It is an imponderable fact - let's leave it alone. This has caused intense ramifications which reverberate around lots of areas of theology.

A second one is 'madhab' which are the schools of thought. There are four schools of thought in the Sunni world we have Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali. The Khawarij's tendency or the 'modernist'



The 'modernist' tendency is that there should be no intermediary between the Qur'an, or the message of God

tendency is that there should be no intermediary between the Qur'an, or the message of God. It is up to the individual to interpret it as they interpret it. Whereas, the 'classic' schools of thought apply a different methodology. This sometimes requires people with large amounts of information and the 'X' factor as they say, a great deal of wisdom. I will explain why later. There is also the madhab of no madhab, the school of no school.

The last but not the least is the nature of the Prophet. The 'modernists' insist upon the complete humanity of the Prophet. That he was only special by dint of having been chosen by God. Whereas the 'classical' position was that his nature was majestic and that he was 'insan al-Kamil', the perfect, balanced human being. Whether that was a result of having been chosen by Allah or whether that was a result of nurture or nature is another thing altogether. This again has major ramifications, for instance, the 'modernists' tendency would be to say 'No' everybody is the same, everybody is sinful or not. Some people may be better than others but that is no reason to go and visit the tombs or graves of saints. So each one of three areas have reverberations in other areas."

"So one of the methodologies of the 'classical' position is that it requires the application of principles to different situations. There is the concept of 'maslaha' in traditional jurisprudence. Maslaha refers to situations wherein something can be silly, or ridiculous, or absurd to apply a ruling or a principle in a particular context.

Maslaha is used a lot within traditional 'classical' jurisprudence. The object of the matter is to orientate people towards divine consciousness. It is not to follow rules or regulations all the time. The 'modernist' position is the uniform application of rules to all situations. Sometimes these rules are placed out of historical contexts, say Bagdad four hundred years ago and applied to every single situation that is encountered, which causes enormous problems. There is no maslaha there, only the application of the rule. Whereas the 'classical' position is the application of principles which sometimes has different outcomes. For instance the ruling of apostasy out of Bagdad four hundred years ago was that if someone went out and claimed to have left Islam it was incumbent on the governor to execute. But that just makes no sense whatsoever so in the modern British context, or even in modern Iraq, or anywhere in the world I can think of at the moment. So if you are insisting on a law which brings Islam into disrepute, if the rule is applied and it brings Islam into disrepute it can be laid aside, this is maslaha. "



Imam Abu Hanifa 699-767CE
Founder of the Hanafi school of law, he introduced analogical reasoning (qiyas) and juristic discretion (istihsan) as permissible tools for making a legal judgement