

PROVOKED TO HOLINESS

The Very Rev Dr Michael Ipgrave

In contemporary English, the word 'provoke' has a generally negative, somewhat insulting, connotation – to 'invite to anger' – but it still retains traces of an older, broader meaning: 'to call forth, summon, invite'. For example, in Shakespeare's *Tempest* [1.2], when Miranda asks her father Prospero, as he tells her the tale of her early years, 'Wherefore did they not that hour destroy us?', he replies: 'Well demanded, wench: my tale *provokes* that question'. This means a sense of stimulation into an appropriate response, laced with some measure of being shocked, triggered into an action which might not otherwise have happened.

'Provoked to holiness' is a phrase taken from the witness of Louis Massignon (1883-1962), the distinguished French Islamicist, Catholic and mystic, who described himself as being 'provoked to holiness' by the example of Islam. Massignon's view of Islam was built on a discernment of the authenticity of the God worshipped by Muslims. Bearing in mind the claim of Islam to derive from Abraham through Ishmael, he saw it as 'the monotheism of those who have been excluded from the privileges awarded to Isaac and so to Israel and the Christian Church, and it calls these two to account for the use made of their privileges'. We can note three points emerging from this conception of Massignon's.

Firstly, there is an intense acknowledgement of the integrity of Islam, and of its spiritual power. Nor is this in hostile sense: uniquely, Massignon felt that in his 'conversion experience' as a young man from he had been brought back from atheism to Catholic faith through the intercession of a chain of saints some of whom were Muslims – he devoted much of his life to writing a study of one of them, the Baghdad mystic al-Hallāj (857-922). Massignon recognised the grandeur of God in Islam, as mediated initially by Abraham, and renewed in the message of Muhammad; his thought had a significant influence on the teaching on Islam in *Nostra Aetate* (1965), which has now become part of the ecumenical heritage of all Christians. [N.B. Massignon's influence was limited in that while *Nostra Aetate* spoke affirmatively of Abraham in connection with the faith of Muslims, it remained notably silent over Muhammad and the Qur'ān].

Secondly, despite, or even because of his positive estimation of Islam, he was equally clear about the distinctiveness of Islam and Christianity, even of their opposition – symbolised in two brothers Isaac and Ishmael. This is an imagery which is used also by Paul in Galatians, there to signify the opposition of Christianity and Judaism; but Massignon, relies on the so-called 'Hagarene theory' which links Islam to Abraham's other wife, while grouping Judaism with Christianity through a common affiliation to Sarah's son Isaac. Massignon was not particularly interested in identifying 'common ground', though he was profoundly interested in unexpected points of contact; the heart of his energy was in exploring the sometimes unexpected ways in which Islam challenged, or 'provoked', Christianity.

Therefore, thirdly, he saw Islam primarily as something to which Christianity was accountable, and which therefore served in the end to further the spiritual health of the Church. Describing the aim of the *Badaliya*, a sodality of Christians which he founded with an especial concern of intercessory prayer for Muslims, Massignon wrote: 'Islam exists and continues to subsist because it is of Abrahamic faith, to force the Christians to rediscover a more bare, more primitive, more simple form of sanctification, which Muslims admittedly only attain very rarely, but through our fault because we have not yet shown it to them in us, and this is what they expect from us, from Christ.'

Massignon was a seminal figure, but he belonged to a particular time and culture; nevertheless, his view of other faiths as ‘provoking Christians’ to holiness has been influential beyond his particular idiom. This became apparent to me at a more mundane level from looking at the way in which Church of England parishes in the ‘Presence and Engagement’ project have often been stimulated to recover a sense of mission and purpose through encounter with active Muslim or other faith communities in their neighbourhoods.

At a sociological level, Philip Jenkins (*God’s Continent: Christianity, Islam, and Europe’s Religious Crisis*, 2007) has written ‘However counterintuitive this may seem, the advent of Islam might be good news for European Christianity’. He points in particular to the way in which Muslims’ readiness to engage unapologetically in the public sphere has been a provocation to many Christians to do the same. Yet, in the light of faith, sociology cannot be enough: one question that has to be asked is, whether Islam in particular, other faiths in general, might not be theologically significant, in other words in some sense ordained by God in order to provoke the Church to greater holiness.

In case all this may seem mere speculation, it is worth looking at the biblical background to the idea of ‘provocation’ – or more specifically, the way in which the Old Testament idea of ‘provocation’ is taken up in the New Testament. There are at least four distinct Greek words which have traditionally been translated ‘provoke’ in the English (AV) New Testament, following the Latin *provocare* of the Vulgate: *parorgizō*, from *orgē*, ‘anger’; *erethizō*, from *eris*, ‘strife’; *paroxunomai* or *paroxusmos* (as in our ‘paroxysm’), from *oxus*, ‘sharp’; and *parazēloō*, from *zēlos*, ‘jealousy’ (like our ‘zeal’). Three points emerge from looking carefully at their use in the New Testament.

Firstly, while their meaning in the OT is uniformly negative, the latter three words can be used both negatively and positively in the NT. So, *erethizō*, which according to Col 3.21 is what fathers should not do to their sons (‘provoke to anger’), is the word Paul uses in 2 Cor 9.2 for the way in which the generous giving of the Corinthian churches has ‘stirred up’ their fellow Christians in Macedonia. Again, while *paroxunomai* in Ac 17.16 describes Paul’s hostile reaction to the idols of Athens, its derivative *paroxysmos* appears in Heb 10.24 in the injunction to Christians to ‘provoke one another to love and good deeds’. And *parazēloō*, which 1 Cor 10.22 uses to warn of the danger of ‘provoking the Lord to jealousy’ through abuse of the Eucharist, it has a positive function in Rom 11.11, 14, where both the salvation of the Gentiles and Paul’s ministry are to serve in God’s purposes to ‘make Israel jealous’.

Secondly, as these last examples from Rom 11 show, ‘provocation’ is in fact used in what could be called an ‘inter faith’ context in the NT, the stimulation of God’s people to holiness through the witness of another community – though in this case, ‘God’s people’ refers to Israel after the flesh, the Jewish nation, and the ‘other’ who is to provoke them is the Gentile Christian community – a dynamic which in some respects is the inverse of the Christian-Muslim relation Massignon was describing.

Thirdly, the two examples of 2 Cor 9.2 and Heb 10.24 show those responsible for the oversight of the churches applying to their internal relationships a language originally negative and recasting it as a positive challenge: ‘provocation’ is here no longer something which we improperly do to God, nor even something which ‘the other’ does to us, but something which we do to one another – and it is good for our common life.

At a time when Christians generally, and Anglicans in particular, face major challenges both in thinking through our inter faith relations and in ordering our common life, perhaps

it is worth thinking further about Massignon's idea of 'provocation to holiness'. Can this be a positive stimulus to our mission?

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