

Editorial

It is relatively rare for a local conflict on religious matters to hit the national headlines. Oxford, however, has recently managed to achieve this with coverage in the *Telegraph*, *The Times* and on the *Today* programme. The cause of this coverage is a plan by the Oxford Central Mosque in Cowley to seek planning permission for an amplified call to prayer (*adhan*)¹ and the reaction that this has provoked, particularly among some Christians.²

The rumours of the planned application broke in November and after letters and comments in the local press and some discussion at the Oxford Council East Area Parliament just before Christmas,³ the Bishop of Oxford, John Pritchard, expressed public sympathy for the mosque's request.⁴ His remarks followed the widely publicised statement from the Bishop of Rochester in the *Sunday Telegraph* which has led to him receiving death threats.⁵ Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali's article gained most publicity for his remarks that 'a worldwide resurgence of the ideology of Islamic extremism' has turned 'already separate communities into "no-go" areas where adherence to this ideology has become a mark of acceptability' and 'those of a different faith or race may find it difficult to live or work there because of hostility to them and even the risk of violence'. He also, however, commented on the issue causing controversy in Oxford:

Attempts have been made to impose an 'Islamic' character on certain areas, for example, by insisting on artificial amplification for the Adhan, the call to prayer. Such amplification was, of course, unknown throughout most of history and its use raises all sorts of questions about noise levels and whether non-Muslims wish to be told the creed of a particular faith five times a day on the loudspeaker. This is happening here even though some Muslim-majority communities are trying to reduce noise levels from multiple mosques announcing this call, one after the other, over quite a small geographical area.

Much of the initial reaction in Oxford was based on rumour and speculation (as the mosque had not, and apparently still has not, formally applied for permission⁶) with fears that the intention was a daily call, at least three and possibly as many as five times a day. It now appears that, in East Oxford at least, the (initial) request is simply going to be for an amplified call to be made once a week for the main Friday prayers. What, though, are we to make of this level of controversy? And,

1 Various examples of the call can be heard in MP3s at <http://www.audioquraan.com/adhan.asp> or, with images and translation, at <http://www.islam4schools.com/adhaan.htm>.

2 While, thankfully, probably unrepresentative, the comments on various web news reports capture some of the anger and outrage. For a helpful short guide to the issues see Ida Glaser's article on the CMS website at <http://www.cms-uk.org/>

3 See minutes at <http://www.oxford.gov.uk/files/meetingdocs/71139/item%203.pdf>

4 The best source for these is not press reports but the bishop's letter to clergy which is available on the diocesan website at <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/page/6186/>

5 The key texts are on the diocesan website at http://www.rochester.anglican.org/bishop_michael_addressarticles_subpage_2008.htm

6 As of January 23rd there was – despite all the public comment – apparently no formal application made for the external sound equipment.

given the disagreement between two evangelical bishops over how to respond and also between Oxford's evangelical bishop and at least one leading evangelical Anglican clergyman in Oxford, how should evangelicals respond?

It would appear that the arguments against permitting the amplified call fall into three broad categories. First, and most prominent in the points made at the Oxford Council East Area Parliament are those to do with its impact on *local community life*. These arise out of very valid concerns about neighbourliness but many are more pragmatic than principled objections and a matter of determining how often and at what volume the call would be issued. The amplified call would not, of course, be setting a precedent as apparently similar calls occur in parts of other British cities. A more serious concern is the longer-term impact on the neighbourhood which, though it has a more significant Muslim population than other parts of Oxford, is not predominantly Muslim (the 2001 Census reports Cowley Ward and Oxford East parliamentary constituency having a population which is around 5% Muslim) but religiously and nationally mixed. In particular, worries have been raised on the impact on house prices in the immediate area of the mosque and fears expressed about a 'ghetto' effect. While these are understandable concerns there is no inevitable cause and effect here and the impact on the community life will ultimately depend largely on how the community as a whole responds. There are clearly strong local objections. For example, Patrick Gray's letter in the Oxford Times begins, 'Our home is 50 yards from the Manzil Way Mosque. We and our neighbours are very concerned by the proposal to place megaphones on the Mosque. I have lived in Moslem countries and have experienced the stress of living near a minaret'.⁷ Such concerns clearly will be heard and weighed when the formal application is considered and ultimately damage to local relationships may be sufficient to merit rejection of the application but the deeper question is whether there are more fundamental and principled reasons why a local community and in particular local Christians should object to such a request.

The second reason that has gained quite a lot of publicity is what could be described as a *cultural* objection, basically that it is 'un-English'. I have to confess that this is an argument that, especially when advanced by Christians, I find disturbing. Its apparent origins in the debate are, however, important. It appears to have arisen from the argument that if we allow church bells then we must allow the amplified *adhan*. There is some force in the argument, responding to this claim, that not only are there significant differences between the two forms of a call to prayer but that one is a long-established tradition and a culturally accepted practice whereas the other is not. As two of the prominent local opponents wrote in December, 'We have heard it said that Muslims do not like the ringing of church bells. Yet bells are a part of the ancient culture of the West, especially in a medieval city. A bell, moreover, is simply a musical signal'.⁸ It has been characteristically expressed in a more strident and pungent fashion by Lord Tebbit in a letter to the Spectator

Sir: Charles Moore (The Spectator's Notes, 12 January) contemplated the banning of church bells in Oxford by politically correct cowards unwilling to turn down the application for the use of artificially augmented calls to prayer from the mosque. I cannot understand what all the fuss is about. There is

⁷ Letter, *Oxford Times*, 11th January 2008.

⁸ Letter from Dr Allan and Mrs Rachel Chapman, *Oxford Times*, 14th December 2007.

nothing in the Koran about the use of loudspeakers. There is nothing to prevent imams from competing with the noise of traffic and calling their prayers as imams did for many centuries. Of course, I would hope that the city authorities would indicate, as they turn down the applications for loudspeakers, that they would be likely to grant an application for bells to be rung from the mosque.⁹

The appeal to English tradition is of course never a knock-down argument as cultures adapt and change (indeed, as Lord Tebbit notes, Islamic culture did not originally amplify the call and historically the introduction of amplification was not without opposition from Muslim ‘traditionalists’). In addition, though the extent of this is often exaggerated, England now has more significant religious minorities whose freedoms need to be respected and protected especially when they are subjected to unwarranted suspicion and hostility or are stigmatised for being ‘different’.

It is these latter dangers that particularly come to the fore when ‘un-English’ is applied not in reference to a comparison with the tradition of church bell-ringing but more widely. This can have the implication that Christian faith and being English have some essential connection and that other faiths and their followers are to be viewed through the lens of national and cultural traditions. The dangers of such an approach are not only the way in which they fuel the extreme right (and the British National Party, for example, has made great play of the Oxford controversy). The dangers are also seen in the hostile nationalistic attitude of some Russian Orthodox church leaders to evangelistic outreach from other denominations and, more worrying but also illuminating, in some Islamic countries. In the week after the ‘un-English’ argument gained national publicity, our local church’s notice sheet announced the opportunity to hear in Oxford from a visiting Turkish evangelist ‘who is on trial in Turkey for “Insulting Turkishness” because of his evangelism’. But Christian objections based on national identity are not only offering hostages to fortune for Christians engaged in mission in traditionally non-Christian cultures, they also undermine a fundamental Christian belief. This is that national and cultural and racial boundaries do not have power in Christ and that the church is truly not a national body but a third race (1 Cor 10.32). Christian engagement with these issues must therefore resist all temptations – strong as they are for those attracted by a Christendom mindset - to think about other faiths in terms of nationality and culture. It must insist that a Christian response is based on the gospel and its destruction of these barriers and its opposition to the divisive principalities and powers.

The third ground for objection relates to the *content* of the call and is more specifically theological in its objection. The Chapmans in their letter quoted above were quite clear about this aspect of their protest – ‘the prayer call is an explicit theological statement in Arabic words about, amongst other things, the prophetic status of Mohammed. To put it plainly, it is public preaching’.¹⁰ The call – though in Arabic so of limited evangelistic power for non-Arabic speakers – testifies that Allah is great, there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Prophet of Allah. It

⁹ Quoted at <http://archbishop-cranmer.blogspot.com/2008/01/anglican-muslims.html>

¹⁰ Letter from Dr Allan and Mrs Rachel Chapman, *Oxford Times*, 14th December 2007.

calls on worshippers to hurry to prayer and to success. In addition to the specific content, some charismatic and Pentecostal leaders' objections apparently relate to a theology of spiritual warfare and understandings of territorial spirits.

Evangelicals will clearly not agree with the content of what is broadcast but that is not the primary issue. We are, thankfully, a society which honours freedom of expression and Christians have learned to accept the right of even those hostile to Christian faith to voice their objections and propagate alternative worldviews. The danger with arguments such as those from the Chapmans is, of course, that they are focussed precisely on 'public preaching' and amount to a form of the attempt to silence voices appealing to the transcendent or to revelation in the public arena lest they offend others.

A wonderful recent development in Christian unity and witness in Oxford has been Love Oxford whose centrepiece for the last two years has been to have a public act of worship (lasting a couple of hours and requiring many more hours of setting up, sound testing etc) on a Sunday morning in Broad Street, a central shopping street. Its vision is clear:

It is to encourage Churches to move their morning service on one Sunday in the year to the heart of Oxford with the purpose of:

- Declaring the praises of Him who brought us out of darkness into Light
- Hearing the Word of God preached by pastors in our city
- Praying for the peace of the city in which God has placed us.

We believe that this is one of the best ways to love our city: that we show our love for and dependence on God; that we speak in a public place about His deep and ever-flowing love, and that we gather His Church together for our city. In this way we want to plant the flag of the gospel again at the very heart of Oxford.¹¹

While there are those who both oppose the Muslim call to prayer and object to Love Oxford, it is difficult to see how one can persuasively argue in principle against the former (particularly if limited to a few minutes a week invasion of the airwaves) while seeking support for the latter. One possible rationale for such an apparent double standard – an imperialistic monopoly for *Christian* public worship and preaching – is not only hard to defend biblically or theologically but a non-starter in a liberal democratic context. There is, therefore, a real danger that Christian protests against a Muslim public presence and proclamation will implicitly buy into a privatising or secularist attitude to religious commitment. They could at least give support to such agendas that will then rapidly turn against a vocal Christian presence, perhaps particularly one of an evangelical nature. In addition, as the Bishop of Oxford emphasised (though was sadly not widely reported as saying), we need to consider Christian public witness not just here but in Muslim countries. Appeals to permit Christian worship and witness in such countries will undoubtedly lose some force if Christians are thought to be antagonistic to Muslim expressions of worship and witness in England.

¹¹ Further details at <http://www.loveoxford.org.uk>

What, then, are we to make of the objections to the proposed *adhan* and the furore caused? They arise – as perhaps shown by some of the arguments advanced – more from the symbolic significance of such a development and the fears that it therefore engenders. These must of course be taken seriously given the missionary zeal of elements of Islam. But there is also the attempt by some to maintain or even reconstruct a dying model of the relationship between religion – especially Christianity – and society.

We are – as Christians – faced with a public sphere (especially in the media) that seems to have less and less of a positive role for authentic Christian witness to the gospel. In fact it is, in many people's experience, increasingly hostile to such testimony. Given our history as a Christian nation and the continued established role of the Church of England that is an understandable cause of regret, concern and anxiety. We also face an awareness of the influence and power of Islam internationally and increasingly within the United Kingdom. There are growing concerns in some circles – particularly among certain evangelical Christians – of the impact of this development on our society, law and political life (hence the outcry about the Archbishop's recent address). Alongside this is the fear that, given its missionary outlook, Islam will in perhaps not many years come to fill the vacuum created by the marginalisation of the Christian voice in the public square. In such a situation, the request by a mosque for an amplified call to prayer across a (largely non-Muslim) community will embody and symbolise for many their (often latent and unspoken) fears. It will be felt as an attempt at the imposition of an alien and threatening way of life to which they are being called to submit.

As the examination of the arguments has shown, however, the problem is that many will then oppose the request by recourse either to a secularist, 'religion is private and should not have a loud public voice' paradigm or to a Christendom model of Christian supremacy and English religion symbolised by church bells. Neither of these approaches is, however, shaped by the gospel of the lordship of the crucified Messiah and the need to repent and be united to him and engrafted, through faith and baptism, into his visible body on earth, the church. In our context that gospel speaks to us those recurring biblical words 'Fear not!' when we are faced by new challenges (whether of how to respond to the *adhan* or these deeper questions of the public face of a religiously plural society). It also warns against losing confidence in the transformative power of Christ present in his church – 'the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world' (1 Jn 4.4) – which is sometimes behind appeals to public authorities to act. This conviction – along with Paul's reminder in Ephesians that our struggle is not against flesh and blood (or bricks and mortars) - should always shape any interpretation that might be offered of such situations in terms of spiritual principalities and powers.

Those words in 1 John, of course, follow after a warning that reminds us also of the need not to submit to those who seek to minimise theological differences between Christianity and Islam and limit our engagement solely to dialogue. Rather we have to offer an alternative to the teachings of Islam by a positive focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ – 'Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out

into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God’.

Rather than fuelling strong emotions and encouraging the exaggeration of the significance of this particular planning request (whether by appeals to national and cultural identity or to theological conflicts and turf wars between different faith traditions) perhaps there is more value than might first appear in the reported words of the Bishop of Oxford – ‘I would say to anyone who has concerns about the call to prayer to relax and enjoy our community diversity and be as respectful to others as you would hope they would be respectful to you’.¹² The request should, in other words, be considered in a genuinely secular, this-worldly manner with reference to the issues raised at the beginning of this editorial under the heading of community concerns: effect on local people, noise level, frequency of the call etc. Those and not the bigger ideological, philosophical and theological issues that have intruded should be determinative. As the Archbishop of Canterbury said in his *World at One* interview:

The Oxford case is actually quite a difficult one as we don’t know yet what the requests are and planning applications are in process. It will be at least a year before anything concrete comes out there. Some people have suggested a compromise where on Friday it may be possible for the call to prayer to be broadcast. I think I would be very uneasy about licensing a regular daily call to prayer. It doesn’t even happen in many Muslim environments. It becomes an iconic thing that some Muslims want to push because they want to be recognised and some people want to push it back on because their space is being invaded. I think we need a bit of an injection of common sense in a mixed community which will never be homogeneously Muslim about what’s appropriate. A daily call to prayer doesn’t seem to be appropriate in that sort of environment.

In this situation, part of the task of the church in the locality is to encourage and enable discernment of what is for the common good. Part of that calling means it must not only build bridges and offer hospitality and opportunities for dialogue but also relativise and, in a sense, de-sacralise the debate. The Christian church is to be a community of people who embody to the wider community the welcome but also the warning that Jesus brings to all people of all faiths. If it is truly salt and light it will therefore be a means of grace, casting out (not naively facilitating) any fear or religious or racial hatred. And it will also unashamedly raise its voice in the streets to bear witness and call people not to submission and success but to a relationship with Jesus where following him is expressed in loving God and neighbour, doing to others as we would have them do to us, denying ourselves and taking up the cross. It is through such a response that the true God who has made himself known in Christ crucified and risen may be made known. Not through amplified calls to prayer or by church bells or by the power of the law or the state but in and through our human weakness.

¹² Quoted in *Oxford Times*, 11th January, 2008.

In this issue

Not only a Muslim call to prayer but also a new movie has recently led to Christian protests. The film is *The Golden Compass*, based on the first of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy. Sadly much of the concern appeared to stem from ignorance about these books. Rick Simpson's short, accessible account and critique shows that, although brilliant stories, there are grounds for Christian concern about the world Pullman creates and serious questions to be raised. At the end of last year, one of the greatest contemporary British theologians died and we are grateful to the Bishop of Chester for writing, at short notice, an appreciation of T.F. Torrance introducing us to his life and thought. Craig Smith continues our series introducing great figures from the past and showing their relevance for today with a study of Richard Baxter's work among young people. Finally, David Smith directs our attention to the church's calling in Europe in the light of our history and present mission challenges.

New Assistant Editor

As noted in our letter to subscribers at the end of last year we are pleased to announce the appointment of Dr. Rachel Jordan as the new Assistant Editor. Rachel brings a strong academic background to this role and to the Editorial Board and the Management Team with a doctorate in the role of women in early 20th century evangelicalism. She also has much practical experience of mission and working with those involved in church planting. Until recently she worked for CPAS. She has recently taken up a post as an associate adviser/researcher in mission and evangelism at Church House and will also be involved with the work of Fresh Expressions.

Andrew Goddard