

Ministry to Muslims – In Dialogue with Kenneth Cragg

by Don Little

Kenneth Cragg's writing is always thought provoking. In his article entitled 'The Riddle of Man and the Silence of God: A Christian Perception of Muslim Response'¹, Cragg reflects on how contemporary Muslim intellectuals are articulating their response to their perception that God is silent in the midst of human suffering and tragedy. Addressing a Christian audience, Cragg argues that an appropriate Christian response to Muslim intellectuals is a form of ministry to them. It is not my purpose in this paper to review and interact with Cragg's observations on how Muslims respond to the problem of pain. Rather I will reflect on his method of dialogue and his suggestions as to how Christians ought to minister to Muslims who are struggling with such fundamental questions.

What is Cragg's argument? First, he calls us to go beyond a superficial and caricatured understanding of Islam and Muslims. Then he describes Islam's self-assured view of itself, which leads Muslims to 'stay fortified within their Islam' (p. 161). He suggests that Muslims cannot find the answers to modernism in isolation – they must engage in conversations with Christians and Jews in order to find common ground in the battle to live out our faith in this modern world. Then he proposes that the Christian doctrine of God becoming man and fully identifying with the human predicament is the only way of enabling faith in God to survive. Thus, the dialogue we need to have with Muslims is about the real meaning of faith in God and the impact of the incarnation on our understanding of God. Our ministry to Muslims must be one 'that has wrestled on the way with Muslims in serious mutuality of personal integrity' (p. 163).

It is worth expanding on Cragg's explanation of how Muslims view Western Christians. He urges Christians to understand 'how ambivalent and apprehensive the Muslim mind is about the West' (p. 160). We need to absorb how much Muslims feel themselves threatened and vulnerable in the face of the growing Western dominance (p. 160). Cragg suggests that much of the current Islamic renewal is in *response* to the West. Muslim intellectuals reject everything about Western values in favour of an assertion of Islamic superiority. Cragg mentions the late Isma'il Al-Faruqi who campaigned for an Islamisation of all knowledge. Al-Faruqi insisted 'that education, especially higher education, must be rescued from spiritually debilitating (Western) presuppositions and based exclusively on norms and values that are safe only in the keeping of Islam'(p. 160).² Only such full Islamisation will suffice to stop the 'rot' among Muslim youth and restore the full authority of the final faith and religion (p. 161).

Further, we Christians must understand how much Muslims equate the bankruptcy of Western values with the failure of Christianity as a 'played-out faith, invalidated by its

own present predicament and unable to discipline its own societies to achieve in the concrete its own high ethics' (p. 161). Thus, for us to be effective as Christians ministering to Muslims, we need to understand the reality of contemporary Islamic resurgence and how Christianity is viewed as failing utterly to stem the tide of corruption and perversion in Western societies.

To be effective in our ministry to Muslims, according to Cragg, we need to fully understand them and earn the right to walk alongside them in their struggle to make sense of their faith in the modern, Western-dominated context in which we all live. It is as we dialogue with Muslims and wrestle together with them to find meaningful answers that we will be able to share the gospel with them in a way that will actually answer their quest for understanding and faith. Thus, Cragg's approach is one of serious intellectual engagement with the leading thinkers of the Muslim world in order to enter into their dialogue and offer the gospel as an answer to the questions they are asking.

Is this approach to ministry to Muslims valid and useful? My first response is that very few Muslims would be able to understand what Cragg is talking about or have the sophistication to enter into sustained and serious discussion along the lines that he proposes. However, for those of us called to a life in the universities, there is something to be said for this approach; but it strikes me as very similar to the approach taken by nineteenth-century European theologians when faced with modernity. They adapted their theology as much as they could so that it would speak to humanists in language that they understood. Often the result was that they so reshaped the gospel that it ceased to have any real connection to orthodoxy. Does Cragg's approach have any hope of succeeding with any Muslims? Does it have any hope of succeeding with some intellectually astute Muslims? Perhaps. Although I am not prepared to dismiss this approach out of hand, I do not see it as holding much promise for effectiveness in witness to Muslims.

On another level, I fully agree with Cragg's insistence that Christians who are ministering to Muslims must resist an over-simplification of Islam. We must indeed understand how Muslims view the West and how they view Christians. Unless we have an accurate and historically informed understanding of why Muslims view us the way they do, we will be unable to relate to them in any meaningful way. Equipped with a clear understanding of Muslims, we will be able to enter into meaningful conversations that will give us opportunities to communicate the powerful effectiveness of Christ and his answers for humanity's distress. When we demonstrate that we have seriously engaged with Muslim thought and that we care about how Muslims view reality, we will open the door to being listened to by Muslims who are not fully satisfied with the answers that Islam provides.

Footnotes

1. Published in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 17, #4, October 1993, pp. 160-

163. This paper is a discussion of this article.

2. Cragg here refers to Al Faruqi's 1982 *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work-Plan*.

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