

Oddbjørn Leirvik. Liberal and Conservative Responses to Globalisation: the Case of the Norwegian Pentecostal Missionary Aril Edvardsen.

This article is published in

The Power of Faiths in Global Politics. Sturla J. Stålsett and Oddbjørn Leirvik (eds.) with Peter Beyer. Oslo: Novus forl., 2004. ISBN 82-7099-398-0

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Liberal, conservative responses to globalisation:
the case of the Norwegian Pentecostal missionary

Aril Edvardsen

Printed in Sturla J. Stålsett and Oddbjørn Leirvik (eds.): *The Power of Faiths in Global Politics*. Oslo: Novus 2004, pp. 165-170.

In his book *Religion and Globalization* from 1994, Peter Beyer distinguishes between “liberal” and “conservative” religious responses to the process of globalisation (Beyer 1994: 86ff.). Whereas the liberal option may be said to be compatible with globalisation, the conservative option – although determined by it – is more strongly marked by a will to resist the globalising logic (ibid: 91).

According to Beyer, liberal religion redefines the communitarian notions from the past in a universalistic direction and reformulates the task of religion accordingly: “... humanity as a whole is the community and the religious task is to work for the fuller inclusion of all people in the benefits of this global community” (ibid: 88). Even when liberal theologians operate within a more conflict-oriented perspective, they tend to reformulate the values of religion by use of more general categories such as justice and equality. This is why Beyer subsumes also liberation theology under liberal responses to globalisation.

Conservative responses, on the other hand, are grounded in traditional types of communitarianism that stress difference and particularity (ibid: 92). According to Beyer, the mode of public performance is also different between liberals and conservatives. Whereas liberals seek to mobilise for political action on a more general, moral basis, conservatives argue that the public influence of religion should also be supported by (religiously anchored) law. In Beyer’s view, conservatives also distinguish themselves from liberals by being less reluctant to identify the evil and to name its social representatives. In that sense, the resurgence of conservative religion worldwide implies “... the reappearance of the devil as that which gives definition to the transcendent ...” (ibid: 91, cf. 83-86). Here, belligerent Muslim and conservative American rhetoric might seem to converge – in mutual

condemnation of “the great American Satan” and “the axis of evil” (or before that, “the evil empire” of communism).

Whereas conservative responses take a form that is distinctively religious in the particularistic sense, the universalistic drive of the liberals implies that their responses to globalisation may be hard to identify as specifically *religious* responses. Typically, liberals engage in social movements which have a more general agenda – such as women's movements, ecological movements, and movements for social justice.

In an interreligious perspective, conservatives should be expected to involve themselves in renewed efforts at global mission, whereas the liberals would rather go for interreligious dialogue.

In terms of performance, Beyer suggests in his book that until the mid-nineties, the conservatives had been more successful than the liberals in making religion visible in the public realm by mobilising the masses in the name of religion. He describes a number of cases – from the Islamic Revolution in Iran via New Religious Zionism in Israel to New Christian Right in USA – which testify to this fact. He also suggests, however, that the liberal option may have better prospects in the future: “To the degree that global society continues to become a more solid reality, the liberal option might be seen as the trend of the future” (ibid: 90).

In the following reflection, I will discuss whether it is still possible to distinguish between liberal and conservative, universalistic and particularistic responses to globalisation. As a test case, I will take the Norwegian neo-Pentecostal missionary Aril Edvardson who displays a confusing blend of liberal and conservative attitudes in his global efforts at proclaiming the Gospel and strengthening interreligious dialogue – literally at the same time.

Interreligious liberation theology?

But before coming to Aril Edvardson, I will take a detour via Iran and South Africa and reflect briefly on the question of how conservative and liberal impulses may interact in Islamic theologies of liberation. In his case study about “The Islamic Revolution in Iran”, Beyer notes a feature which has become even more striking after 1994: what started out as a typically particularistic response to globalisation, with religious officials as the vanguards of revolution, has evolved into a democratic process in which the liberalising features have become just as striking as the conservative ones. After Khatami was elected President of the Islamic republic in 1997, the conflict between the liberals and the conservatives has become

even more intensified. After his re-election in 2001, the conservatives have tried even harder to strike back from the positions they continue to hold (in the Council of Guardians, the judiciary etc.), but their attempts to curb liberal trends have been met with firm and vociferous resistance.

A general lesson that could be drawn from the Iranian experiment is probably that the religious conservatives have better stakes when in *opposition* than in position. When in opposition, the Islamists may hoist banners proclaiming “Islam is the solution”. In position, however, the hard realities of politics will soon reveal that there is no such thing as a uniform “Islamic” economy, democracy, or international order. Once this is revealed, within a system that allows for political differences (which the Iranian system has in fact done), society – and perhaps many of the conservatives too – may already be moving in a liberal direction.

Beyer notes that before the Iranian revolution, there were several tendencies within the resistance movement. Some inclined towards Marxism, some towards Islamism, others towards a form of Islamic democracy. But even in the case of Khomeiny’s Islamism, conflicting approaches could in fact be identified and particularistic tendencies seem to have competed with more universalistic ones right from the beginning. In the 1980s, Ayatollah Khomeiny and other leaders of the Iranian revolution often expressed their universalistic sympathy for the oppressed peoples of the world and for revolutionary liberation movements. Even before his return to Iran, on 12 January 1979, Khomeiny made an advertisement in New York Times in which he appealed to the Christian clergy and all “freedom-loving Christians” to “wage a spiritual war against the superpowers who act contrary to the way of the prophets and the way of Christ” (Watt 1989: 120f, 139).

Khomeiny’s vision of a global, interreligious alliance against the superpowers did not, however, materialise. At the end of the day, the Iranian revolution became far too particularistic and illiberal in its scope and practice to earn a broader appeal among liberation theologians around the world. The reasons why the particularistic tendency got the upper hand in the Iranian revolution is well explained in Beyer's book. But events could have taken a different turn and since 1997, President Khatami has actively propounded his vision of a “Dialogue among civilizations”.

In other contexts, examples of real Muslim-Christian alliances in the struggle against oppression can in fact be cited. As noted in this books’ chapter about “Interfaith dialogue and liberation theology”, the South African Muslim Farid Esack has reflected on the experiences of joint Muslim-Christian struggle against apartheid, a struggle that was controversial in both camps (*Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, Esack 1997). The outcome of his reflections is a

theology that is both *liberationist* in socio-political terms and *liberal* in cultural, interreligious respect. The South African example testifies also to the fact that the dividing lines in the most acute moral and political challenges of our times do in fact not coincide with the barriers between religious communities. Instead, moral and political differences cut right across religious divides – as we have also witnessed, since 2001, in critical Muslim and Christian responses to the US-led war on terrorism (Leirvik 2003).

In Beyer's book, he distinguishes between pure religious *function* in the “sacred” realm and applied religious *performance* in the social and political sphere (Beyer 1994: 80). The point I am making is that religious public performance, in the form of political resistance or co-operation for peace and justice, may just as well be interreligious as confessional in nature. A Norwegian example that can be cited is the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief, in which leaders of the faith communities in Norway engage each other and like-minded international partners in projects focused on dialogue and religious freedom.¹ In the peace process in Sri Lanka, the Church of Norway and the Buddhist Association of Norway have been co-operating successfully with local Christian and Buddhist partners.

Aril Edvardsen: a liberal, conservative case for mission and dialogue

Turning now from liberation theology to missionary activity, I will focus on the Norwegian, (neo)-Pentecostal missionary Aril Edvardsen's confusing blend of particularism and universalism. Aril Edvardsen is not a *liberation* theologian and definitely not a *liberal* theologian in moral or doctrinal respects. But in political terms and in his approach to interreligious co-existence, he could in fact be described as a liberal. As a neo-Pentecostal evangelist and healer, he fulfils a pure religious “function“. But he has also something to offer in terms of public “performance” – as a herald of both religious freedom *and* friendly co-existence between believers of different faiths.

In 1999, Aril Edvardsen hosted a Christian-Muslim dialogue conference in Norway, under the slightly ambitious heading of “Universal peace and harmony”. For the first time in Norway, a large group of Pentecostal leaders visited a Norwegian mosque and received Muslim leaders in their churches (Mydland 2000. Cf. Leirvik 2001/1996: 214). The conference was a follow-up to a visit that Aril Edvardsen had made to Pakistan earlier the same year. This led to three prominent Muslim leaders (headed by Dr. Abdul Qadir Azad) and

¹ See the Oslo Coalition's web-page, www.oslocoalition.org

one Christian leader coming together from Pakistan to join the conference in Norway. With some other Lutheran colleagues, I was invited to represent the Church of Norway.² By more conservative Christians in Norway, Aril Edvardsen has been much criticised for his open-minded approach to Islam and Muslim faith. Because of renewed critique prior to the conference, he had to retract his initial plans of praying together with the Muslims during the mutual visits in mosque and church.³

As for the initial dialogue conference and evangelical campaign in Pakistan in 1999, his magazine reported on “miracles in Pakistan”. The primary miracle was, of course, that he was able to preach the Gospel to thousands of Pakistanis (most of them Muslims) and also to heal many of them. The other miracle was that Aril Edvardsen was commended by the President of the Pakistani Parliament, Mohammed Rafiq Tarar, for his efforts towards interreligious reconciliation. In return, the President received not a crucifix but a Norwegian flag planted in a Viking ship.

I agree that what happened was really a miracle. First, Aril Edvardsen was able to rally a great number of Muslim and Christian leaders for a dialogue conference on “Universal peace and harmony”. Then, he rallied thousands of Muslims who received his charismatic proclamation of the healing power of Christ. Not only that, reportedly he was also invited home by two of the Muslim leaders who asked him to pray for their diseases in the name of Jesus (Edvardsen 1999a, Mydland 1999).

In 2002, he repeated his success in a similar combination of dialogical and evangelical crusade, once again reported in his magazine as “A historical miracle crusade in Islamic Pakistan” (Edvardsen 2002a). The bulk of this issue of the magazine is dedicated to a detailed report of all those who were miraculously healed when Aril Edvardsen proclaimed Jesus as the healer of soul and body in Gaddafi stadium in Lahore. According to the report, more than 80 000 also received a catechetical follow-up (Edvardsen 2002b). But as in 1999, his achievements in the field of dialogue are also described as a miracle. In the 2002 dialogue conference, both Muslim, Christian and Sikh leaders took part. In one of Aril Edvardsens ensuing evangelical meetings, even Tahir ul-Qadri, the charismatic leader of the organisation Minhaj ul-Quran turned up and stood hand in hand on the podium with Aril Edvardsen and his main Christian partner in Pakistan, Marqus Fida. Tahir ul-Qadri used to be known for his

² Many of my liberal colleagues were surprised to find me as a partner in one of Aril Edvardsen’s projects. After a spirited and successful co-operation in the dialogue conference, I surprised myself by accepting Edvardsen’s invitation to come to his next neo-Pentecostal summer meeting to speak about Jesus in Islam.

³ *Dagen*, 23. november 1999, s. 7 (“Kritikk for muslim-bønn”) and *Magazinet* nr. 42, 19. november 1999: (“Felles bønn med muslimer i Pinsekirken in Bærum”).

apologetic and at times confrontational approach to Christianity (see ul-Qadri 1987). Together with Aril Edvardsen he appeared with a soft voice, reportedly reading from the Sermon on the Mount.

What is this? Is it missionary activity supported by tactical manoeuvres and camouflaged by conspicuous dialogue events? Or are we witnessing a genuine, dual commitment to mission and dialogue, surpassing the “old” alternatives of conservative and liberal approaches to globalisation? How does Aril Edvardsen legitimise his combined evangelical and dialogical mission in theological terms? And how does his activity fit with the distinction between pure religious function and applied public performance?

First, it is not easy to determine what should be labelled pure religious *function*. Miraculous healing, for instance, could probably be described as a public *performance* related to the residual problems of poverty and mal-functioning health services in such countries as Pakistan.

Secondly, in terms of *theology* Aril Edvardsen does clearly not belong to those conservatives who warn against Islam as an evil power or denounce Allah as an idol. For his insistence that in Arab culture, Allah is but the common Christian-Muslim name for the one and only God (Edvardsen 1997), he has been criticised by fellow conservatives. Although he indicates that certain other religions are more liable to the influence of evil than one’s own, Edvardsen should not be counted as a confrontational conservative. According to Edvardsen, any missionary effort directed towards Muslims should first of all confirm what they already believe in God. Only then can Christ be meaningfully proclaimed as the fulfilment of their (and every other believer’s) spiritual longings. His views on mission inscribe him in the ranks of those who propound a more liberal, fulfilment type of missiology.

By other parameters, however, Edvardsen clearly belongs to the conservative camp. This is true both of his views on the inerrancy of the Scriptures and his position in matters pertaining to “family values”.

Third, it is quite clear that Aril Edvardsen's activity has a *political* dimension to it. In the first place, he has managed to get substantial *support* from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for his evangelical-cum-dialogical mission (Brekke 2002: 15-25). In this way, Aril Edvardsen links up with the official Norwegian policy of international peace-making and is able to present himself as a messenger not only of Christ but also of “universal peace” (by the way, Christ as the prince of peace seems also to be an established *topos* in his evangelical campaigns). A video produced by his organisation, labelled “State leader promo”, demonstrates how successful he has been abroad in gaining local political support for his

peace and friendship campaigns – be it in Pakistan, in Caucasus, or in Palestine where he was able to earn the confidence of Yassir Arafat himself (Edvardsen 1999b).

His mission may also have – at least indirectly – some tangible political *effects*, first of all as regards freedom of religion and a more relaxed, inter-religious atmosphere in civil society. In his magazine, the Christian leader Marqus Fida praises Aril Edvardsen for widening the scope of religious freedom in Pakistan (Fida 2002).

In my view, Aril Edvardsen's performance in Pakistan is more than tactical manoeuvres on the part of a neo-Pentecostal evangelist. A good indication that he is seriously committed not only to mission but also to dialogue is the fact that he has lost some of his followers among fundamentalist Christians in Norway over his support for the Palestinian cause (and his suggestion that Christians and Muslims basically believe in the same God).

It is not clear, however, whether Aril Edvardsen should be considered as a special case or as a sign of the times. I would suggest the latter. Interreligious dialogue is no longer only a liberal cause. It is also slowly becoming a conservative one. One of the Muslim leaders whom Aril Edvardsen was able to mobilize in this years' campaign in Pakistan, Tahir ul-Qadri of Minhaj ul-Qur'an, may be another example. When Tahir ul-Qadri first visited the Nordic countries in the 1980s, his organisation boasted that he had totally silenced the Christian leaders whom he met, obviously in rather war-like dialogues. His book about *Islam and Christianity* from 1987 is of the same confrontational style (ul-Qadri 1987).⁴ When Tahir ul-Qadri visited Norway in 1999, however, he staged an "International Peace Conference" in Oslo, and in 2002, we find him reading from the Sermon on the Mount in Pakistan, side by side with Aril Edvardsen. On the Nordic scene, the members of his organisation Minhaj ul-Qur'an often take an active part in interreligious initiatives.⁵

Now, some would probably suggest that the liberal cause that unites religious conservatives is religious freedom only (cf. the role that Seventh Day Adventists and Mormons have long played in international associations for religious freedom). But there may be more to it. Perhaps what we are witnessing is also a converging concern of liberal and (moderate) conservative Christians and Muslims when faced with resurgent enemy images and mounting militant extremism. Neither conservatives nor liberals would like to see a new global order dictated by brutal terrorism and heavy responses to it that are tainted by the same infectious dichotomy of "good" and "evil".

⁴ Cf. Per Lønning's justified critique in Lønning 1997: 84-96, cf. Lønning 1998.

⁵ For instance, Minhaj ul-Qur'an in Denmark is a partner in the Islamic-Christian Study Center in Copenhagen.

Or maybe what is now being demonstrated is the simple fact that conservative religionists are in fact fully prepared to espouse a kind of global civil religion if only particular identities are also respected and given space. Perhaps Peter Beyer's question at the very last page of his book can already be answered in the affirmative: "Is it possible that the result of [the] search for self-description will lead to a global religious culture, a kind of 'global civil religion' that still permits sub-global and particular systemic religion and religious culture?" (Beyer 1994: 227). Yes, it is possible, and the prophecy is already becoming true. But only in some circles.

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