

## Sweetness and Light in Melcombe Street

Some media organisations have established a reputation for mis-representing the teachings of Islam and the Muslims who seek to embody them and have predictably taken advantage of the justifiable outrage caused by the recent July bombings in London to tar the very many law abiding Muslims of this country with the brush of the extremism of the very few (even though they had never gone so far before in the past as to label all Christians as terrorists because of the bombings of the IRA or Timothy McVeigh) – but I was nevertheless amazed and shocked to read an article in the Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> July 2005 edition of the Evening Standard which accused Dar Al Taqwa of peddling terror and hatred “just yards from Baker Street” and of “urging Muslims to wage a holy war by arming themselves with bombs and guns”. As well as displaying a photograph of the Dar Al Taqwa shop front including its telephone and fax numbers, the article printed photos of three book or video covers directly below which it claimed are “advocating terrorism in the name of Islam” and are “available in West End bookshops such as Dar Al Taqwa above”.

Now I had been visiting Dar Al Taqwa regularly ever since it opened some 21 years ago and in my experience it had always stocked a wide selection of good quality books, including its own publications, on the teachings of Islam. More often than not whenever I visited, I would be plied with greetings and glasses of sweet tea, but no one had ever invited me to take up arms against a sea of troubles and end them with bombs and guns – and none of the books I had leafed through or purchased at Dar Al Taqwa advocated such extreme measures, measures which are usually justified by cowardly politicians who assert that it is necessary to kill tens of thousands of civilians overseas in order to enforce peace. I had certainly never seen any of the three book or video covers pictured in the article on sale at Dar Al Taqwa, although I did recognize the photograph of Dr Zakir Naik on one of them as being a man who has always spoken out against acts of terrorism, whoever the perpetrators, and I have no doubt that this in fact is the message of this video.

When I visited Dar Al-Taqwa the next day I was not surprised to receive my customary greetings and cups of tea – nor was I surprised to learn that none of the three said book or video covers had ever been on sale at Dar Al Taqwa, nor was I surprised to learn that ever since the article had been published, there had been a marked decrease in customers entering the shop and a stream of abusive and threatening phone calls which had necessitated the police having to be called in order to ensure extra surveillance and protection of the shop and its staff.

Not only was the article defamatory and inaccurate but in the name of being tough on terrorism it had irresponsibly put the staff of Dar Al Taqwa in fear of their own physical safety, damaged its business and incited racial and religious hatred against Muslims in general. It had also put extra demands on a police force whose members already have more than enough to deal with as it is. After receiving a detailed letter of complaint which the paper was unwilling to publish, the general editor of the Evening Standard did agree to publish this article as well as an unreserved apology by way of making amends and in order to help put the record straight.

Not only did the seasoned Evening Standard reporter who had visited Dar Al Taqwa before writing his article intentionally misrepresent “the facts”, but also his article did not picture or mention the “Not in Our Name” poster which had been on display in the shop window

ever since it was published in the media on the 21<sup>st</sup> July 2005 and which not only condemns the terrible atrocities of July 7<sup>th</sup> in London and rejects anyone who “tries to link such brutal acts to the teachings of Islam”, but also urges the media and politicians especially to “maintain the values of our open society, free from prejudice, sustained by tolerance and mutual respect”. Instead his article sought to insinuate the exact opposite – that even mainstream Islamic bookshops such as Dar Al Taqwa encourage terrorism.

As regards the kind of books which Dar Al Taqwa actually does stock and has always stocked, these are all concerned with providing accurate accounts by reliable scholars of the teachings of Islam – which are concerned first and foremost with knowledge and worship of the Creator of the Universe. The five obligatory pillars of Islam are concerned entirely with worship of the Divine : the double affirmation that there is no god except God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God, blessings and peace be on him; the five daily prayers; the fast of Ramadan; the payment of the 2.5% Zakat tax on surplus wealth (for re-distribution amongst the poor); and the pilgrimage to Makka – these are all acts of worship which Muslims believe result in a heart at peace in this world and Paradise in the next world.

Dar Al Taqwa stocks copies of the Qur’an, the book which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by the angel Jibril (Gabriel), in the original Arabic and in translation. In it, for example, God states, “I only created mankind and the jinn to worship Me,” and, “Only in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest.” Many of the books record how the prophet Muhammad lived and what he said, including his words, “The Muslim is the one from whose hand and whose tongue you are safe,” and, “You are not a Muslim until you want for others what you want for your self,” and, “You are not a believer until you prefer for others what you want for your self.” Some of the books are concerned with the history of the Muslims during the last fourteen centuries and others are about Sufism, the inner dimension of Islam, which was defined by one Muslim saint, Shaykh Muhammad ibn al-Habib, as, “Loving God and being kind to all creatures, even the smallest insect.” Other books describe the teachings and lives of the earlier prophets, including Moses and Jesus, blessings and peace be on all of them, whom all practising Muslims accept and respect as the messengers of God who preceded the prophet Muhammad.

Both the Qur’an and the recorded sayings of the prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, remind us of and describe – as did all of God’s earlier revelations and messengers - the next world which awaits us all on the other side of death, warning us of the Fire of Hell which awaits the rebellious and giving good news of the Garden of Paradise which awaits the obedient.

In conclusion, if you would genuinely like to learn more about the teachings of Islam, which literally means “submission to the will of God”, you will find a fine and wide selection of books at Dar Al Taqwa. If you want to learn about murder and mayhem, search elsewhere. And in case you’ve been wondering, “Dar” means “house” and “Taqwa” means “awe and wonder” – not because of the terrifying impact of deadly daisy-cutters, bunker busters and napalm bombs exploding all around you with laser precision, nor because of the malignant cancers caused by the haphazard use of armour piercing radioactive depleted uranium tipped shells – but because of the dawning realisation that the One Who created the entire cosmos and everything in it including you is closer to you than your jugular vein.

Peace.