

Kenneth Cragg's Islam

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Soon after I heard the news of Bishop Kenneth Cragg's death, I made a tally of his books. I counted 57, beginning with *The Call of the Minaret* in 1956. Cragg quickened the pace as he grew older, publishing an astonishing 20 books in the last 12 years of his life. A friend recently emailed me complaining how difficult it was to keep up with Cragg's output. 'Kenneth Cragg wrote faster than I can read', he said. Nor did Cragg make the reading easy. His prose is dense with word-play, unusual syntactical structures, neologisms, poetic allusions, and long strings of interrogatives. His enthusiasms encompassed poetry, existentialism, Shakespeare, Judaica, Palestinian literature, biblical studies, Arab Christianity, comparative religion, theology, English and Arabic philology, and, of course, the Qur'an. His agile and imaginative mind ranged freely across all of this territory, finding theological insight in unusual places and making unexpected connections.

Cragg will not, however, be remembered chiefly for this breadth, but for his single-minded devotion to Christian theological engagement with Islam. In April 1939, he began his career in Lebanon as a conventional missionary, but his intellectual ambition soon outgrew the constraints of that role. At the American University of Beirut, where he taught philosophy between 1942 and 1947, and subsequently in pursuit of his Oxford doctorate, Cragg began to see as his vocation 'the whole ethos of Islam', rather than the salvation of individual souls. His massive doctoral thesis (843 pages in two volumes, excluding appendices and bibliography) was a sort of road map to this vocation, and the title was its precis: 'Islam in the Twentieth Century: The Relevance of Christian Theology and the Relation of the Christian Mission to its problems'. Cragg never substantially departed from this route, mapped out in 1950. His ambition was to enter the world of Islamic thought, to explore with deep sympathy the message, meaning, conflicts, and difficulties of the intellectual life

of modern Muslims, and to sympathetically apply the lessons of the Christian theological struggle with modernity to the Muslim experience. In this way, he aimed to examine the limitations and unresolved issues of Islam in its own terms, and to engage as a participant in the 'counsels' of modern Islam. Among Protestants, Cragg has been unique in this ambition and in the skills that he brought to it. No one has pursued Muslim-Christian theological engagement so persistently and imaginatively over such an extended period of time.

Yet if we are properly to assess the value of Cragg's contribution, we will need to take careful measure of the prospects and the limits of his project. We can get to the heart of that project with a simple exercise. Let us draw a circle, and imagine that this circle encompasses all phenomena that can be labelled "Islam." Now further imagine that I, an outsider to Islam, set out to engage with the contents of the circle. If I wish to engage with an individual Muslim and to enter sympathetically into his worldview, the task may not be easy, but it will be straightforward, and I will do my best to adopt W. C. Smith's famous dictum, 'The believer is always right'.

But suppose, like Cragg, I want to engage not just with individual believers, but somehow with Islam *qua* Islam. How do I do this? I can place myself outside the circle, and I can proceed to evaluate the contents of the circle from some external vantage point. I might adopt a Christian vantage point, I might adopt the vantage point of an historian, or I might place myself in what I imagine to be the intersection of the perspectives of the Christian and the historian, applying criteria appropriate to both. Wherever I stand, I will have adopted criteria external to the tradition, and it will be clear that the ground I choose is not neutral, except perhaps in my imagination.

But what if I eschew the position of outsider, and set out, like Cragg, to engage Islam sympathetically and from within? Some will argue that this is impos-

sible. Cragg's more severe Muslim critics have insinuated that his approach is merely missionary polemic attractively disguised, and that the disguise makes his work especially insidious. But suppose we grant, for the sake of discussion, that the sympathy Cragg aimed for is possible, or at least that it is worth the attempt. Moreover, let us assume that his attempt was sincere, a judgment that no one who met him is likely to dispute. If I try to follow in Cragg's path, to enter as far as possible into 'the ethos of Islam', I am immediately faced with a dilemma. Where will I place myself in the circle of Islam? I cannot enter in some abstract, disembodied way, and I cannot embrace the whole of it. Sympathy requires that I enter at a specific place, adopting a specific vantage point. There is no neutral vantage point within the circle, just as there is none outside of it. I must stand someplace, for I am limited by capacity, by time, and by space. I must decide. And in deciding, I must inevitably evaluate. I must make choices, implicit or explicit, about what is authentic, what is not; what is central, what is peripheral; how large and inclusive, or how small and exclusive my circle will be; and even what I will read and what languages I will learn. Insiders in any tradition cannot escape such choices, and what can entering sympathetically into the 'ethos of Islam' possibly mean if it does not mean attempting to think like a believer?

The choices Cragg made both informed and limited his project. As a Christian, he could not be present or sympathize equally with all ways of being Muslim. But the alternative was to give up the attempt and to abandon sympathy altogether. This way of thinking about Cragg's work marks the starting point of my own interest in locating 'Kenneth Cragg's Islam', discovering where he 'fits' in the world of modern Islamic thought, and assessing the implications of his choices and sympathies for our understanding both of Cragg and of the rich strands of modern Muslim intellectual history with which his life and work were interwoven.

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