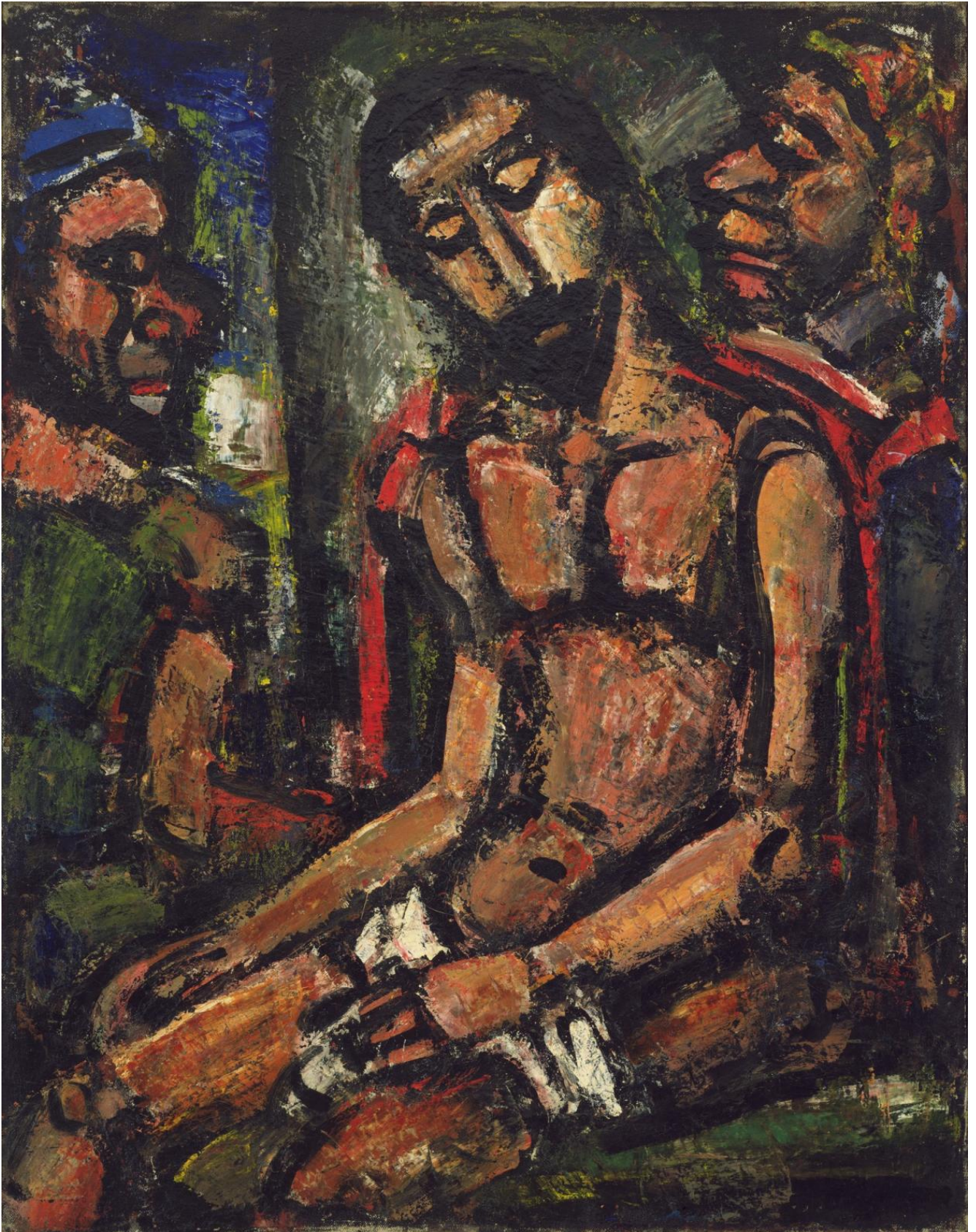


# Afghanistan, Jihad, and Islam: a Conversation with Dr. Mark Durie

Mark Leach is the Rector of Darling Street Anglican Church, in inner city Sydney, Australia. Mark was born in Zambia to Roman Catholic and Jewish parents. He grew up in Zimbabwe and South Africa, coming to a life-changing faith in Jesus as Messiah and God at age 15. A few years at medical school were followed by study at Moore Theological College in Sydney and ordination. He has led Anglican churches in Sydney, Melbourne, and Toronto (Canada).

Dr. Mark Durie is an academic and Anglican priest. He was elected to the Australian Academy of Humanities in 1992. After two decades working as a pastor, he is now a Senior Research Fellow at the Arthur Jeffery Centre for the Study of Islam at Melbourne School of Theology, a Fellow of the Middle East Forum, and Director of the Institute for Spiritual Awareness. Mark writes and speaks on linguistics, Islam, Christian-Muslim relations, and religious freedom. His most recent book is *The Qur'an and its Biblical Reflexes* (2018).



Christ Mocked by Soldiers, Georges Rouault, 1932

✖ Mark Leach: It's my very great pleasure this morning to be talking to Mark Durie. Mark, I think you're an extraordinary human being with just so much to offer. You're one of the most



gracious, thoughtful, intelligent, insightful people on so many issues. That's because I have known you for many, many years, but others who are listening may not know you, so give us a little bit of a thumbnail sketch of your background. What brings you to this point and why we should listen to you talk to us and have a conversation around Afghanistan, and the Taliban, and Jihad?

Mark Durie: I'm an Anglican pastor. I've been a Christian all my life. For about 20 years, I was an academic in linguistics and taught and researched at leading universities and was head of Linguistics at Melbourne University. I felt called into pastoral ministry, so I left that behind, studied theology and retrained.

I spent 21 years in parish ministry in the Anglican Church, but my original field work for my PhD in Linguistics was in Aceh, in Indonesia, which is a very Islamized society, increasingly so. This opened my eyes to aspects of Islam and then after 9/11 I devoted myself to studying about Islam, and teaching and equipping the church. So, it's been a fascinating and interesting journey, including pastoring a congregation of Muslim background believers in Melbourne: we've baptized more than 150 people there, mostly Iranians. But these days I devote myself to teaching Islamics and pastoral theology for Melbourne School of Theology, and I also write and teach and do training, equipping the church to understand the times that we live in very significant issues that are facing Christians on many different fronts.

ML: You thought one PhD wasn't enough, so as part of your journey in getting to understand Islam, you did some more studies. You have a second earned PhD, tell us just a little bit about that.



MD: I was really fascinated with the question of why there's

so much Biblical material in the Quran, and what does it mean that there's so much of the Bible in Islam. So, I pursued that over many years. I wanted to write a book, an academic book, and it seemed like a good way to do it was to do a PhD, so, in 2016 I finished the PhD, and in 2018 I published *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Reflexes*. I was arguing that the Quran uses the Bible, but it doesn't comprehend it. It doesn't import Biblical theology in any way. So, in a sense you could say I was arguing against the Abrahamic thesis that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are on a family tree of related religions. I concluded that Islam is, in a sense, genetically unrelated: it borrows a lot of material, but it changes it re-deploys it in all sorts of ways. Its re-purposes the Bible; it doesn't inherit from the Bible.

It's a quite important issue. You have people like Archbishop Rowan Williams in England and others who've argued that Islamic sharia in fact should be embraced in Europe because of the continuity between Abrahamic faiths: "It's not as if it's an alien religion." And you've got leading intellectuals in Germany saying that Islam is native to Europe: it should be embraced as part of the European heritage. Theologically, I was arguing that that's not true: it's a very different theology, and there are civilization building consequences for that. It's important for the church: How do we understand ourselves in relation to Islam? Do we worship the same God? Do we believe in the same prophets? Is there a bridge of understanding, or is it a chasm of difference, despite the superficial similarities?

ML: What sort of reception has that work had? Is our civilization changing? Are European academics reading your work and going, "Oh my goodness, we've got Islam all wrong?" In the Christian academy has this been something that has shifted the needle on people who want to argue that we all worship the same God?

MD: That's an interesting question. I've been teaching and

communicating about these issues for many years across many fronts. Some Christian leaders are waking up and understanding Islam better. Some parts of the church are well-positioned; others are in deep trouble.

Academically, the book has been well received. The professor of Quranic Studies at Oxford University, Nicolai Sinai, gave it a great plug, and Gabriel Reynolds, who's an American academic, and probably the leading Quran academic, appreciated the book and wrote a very positive review. So, it's been well received.

I brought in linguistics and theology into the mix because people who work in Quranic studies are not trained in theology, so there has never been a proper theological analysis of the Quran as a result. I think those two skills – linguistics and theology – have opened lots of new avenues of thought for people. So, one keeps going I've certainly seen many Christian pastors change in their understanding and rethink their position, but it's a long intergenerational task to equip the church to respond to the challenge of Islam. The challenge has been there for 1,400 years but the Church has made some bad mistakes in its understanding of Islam. It's often thought of Islam as a kind of Christian heresy, sort of Christianity gone wild. That's a bad, inaccurate way of thinking about Islam, but I think now, after more than a millennium, the Church is beginning to understand Islam better. People like John of Damascus, Aquinas, and Luther and others: they made that mistake. It's going to take time for us, but the good thing is that now we know more about Islam. As Christians, we understand it better, we have better resources: light is shining into Islam. So, I find it an exciting time to be involved in this work.

ML: That's a segue into the topic of the day, the resurgent triumphant Taliban in Afghanistan. It seems to me, after 9/11 Islam became just the topic of conversation everywhere, and the heightened aware of Jihad, the discussions about Jihad.

People were concerned about Islamic immigration, about influence in the West, with lots of debates, lots of concern. And then it died down. We had all other things to distract us, and we sort of hoped that it will go away. The incidents of terror in major western cities declined. But now, I suspect it's back. I suspect this is now going to be a new season of it being front-of-line. So, I thought it would be good to get your perspectives on what's happened and why and how we can perhaps make sense of the Taliban. So, what I'd like to start with is, can you locate the Taliban for us on the spectrum of Islamic theology and practice?

There's a whole range of views. Some people will say, and you may already have heard this, "Oh, the Taliban, they're just terrorists, they're not really Muslim." I've already seen that trope doing the rounds, and you go, "Hmm. Okay. No, they do claim a religious motivation, but not every person who claims to be a follower of Mohammed is a terrorist or follows the Taliban. 'So where do they sit on this? If you can give us place to will locate them on that territory, it would be very helpful.

MD: I want to step back a bit and set it in the context of global developments regarding Islam. From about 1500 onwards, Islam was in political and military decline. It was being defeated on many, many fronts, from Central Asia and Southeast Asia to Africa and Mediterranean. This caused a crisis because Islam is a success-oriented religion. It promises dominance to its followers: political and military dominance. The call to prayer says, "Comes to success, come to success."

So, from the 17th century on, there were a whole raft of revivalist movements, the first probably, the Wahhabi Movement in Arabia, but spreading into the British colonies and across the Arab world. These movements, which include Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Muslim Brotherhood, Jamaat-e-Islamia and the Taliban, all have a shared core idea, which is that the failures of Islam to dominate and to be successful are due to the lack of sharia

compliance: a lack of faithfulness in following the code of Allah.

The solution to Islamic decline is the resurgence of the sharia everywhere. So, women are covering up to an extent which wasn't happening 30 or 40 years ago: for example, just look at photographs of graduating classes in many Muslim countries. The Taliban is part of that movement: the word *taliban* means 'students' and they're students of Islam.

They are not as extreme as ISIS. ISIS criticizes them for not being strict enough in imposing the sharia, but they are certainly conservative Islamic. People might use pejorative labels for the Taliban's views on Islamic law, but really it reflects Orthodox mainstream Islamic positions that are embedded in medieval sharia textbooks and were considered unquestionable as part of Islam until the modern period. For example, the seclusion of women, the control of women by guardians, this is just core Islam: it's been the case in Saudi Arabia and in other strictly Islamicized societies. It's just that the Taliban has not conceded anything to modernity or to liberal views. The whole of the Muslim world has really been struggling with the sharia revival and its implications. In cases where it's been attempted, such as Iran, Algeria, and Egypt under the Muslim Brotherhood, it's generally been a failure.

So yes, I would say the Taliban are a genuine Islamic Movement. Their fight is legitimate from a sharia perspective. There's a principle in Islam that sovereignty should belong to Allah. That means that the law of the land should be Islam, and when you have a caliph, a leader of the Muslim global community, one of his responsibilities, one of the caliphate's responsibilities, is to advance the borders of Islam through military activity. It's what's called a communal obligation in Islam. The sharia schools of the medieval period taught this. But when Islamic territory is occupied by infidels, by people who do not practice, or promote Islam, or impose Islam, then

it becomes an individual obligation on every Muslim to go for jihad and to resist the oppressor. This idea is mainstream, and it's had a big impact on the colonial powers. It impacted the Dutch in Aceh where I worked: there was a 40-year insurgency there. It was an issue for the British on the North-West Frontier, [in India]. The British dealt with this by declaring that the British Empire was an Islamic State: they got fatwas from the heads of the Islamic schools in Mecca and from the Ottomans to support this.

The problem with having infidel occupiers in Afghanistan is that even though they wrote in the constitution of Afghanistan, the new constitution, that the sharia sat over all the law code of the country – even though they created an Islamic State there – nevertheless, from an Islamic point of view, their very presence and dominance in the process made the Afghan government illegitimate. This really has fueled the resistance.

You can take it down to a very basic question: "If you're an 18-year-old Afghani and you're going to go to fight, whose side are you going to fight on?" On the one hand, you've got people saying, "You have an individual obligation to resist the infidel occupier. And if you die fighting, you'll go to paradise and it'll be great, and you'll be able to intercede for 60 of your family. And if you don't die and you win, then that'll be great as well, you'll be a hero." On the other hand, you can fight for the infidels, but when you die in battle then where will you go? The Taliban will tell you that you're going to hell. That religious motivation is hard to eradicate and hard to overcome. What the Americans would have had to do to overcome this is tell all of Afghanistan that they have the only true Islamic government.

The other solution is liberalization, and that has happened to some extent under the Americans. I would say that the Taliban are a legitimate Islamic movement; their policies arise from classical orthodox Islamic teachings. They are not aberrant:



they're aberrant from a Western Liberal perspective. This is one of the reasons why they were so successful and why their final victory was so rapid and lightning fast across the country. Everything collapsed when the Americans basically said they were going.

ML: The question that went through my mind as you were speaking was given that religious motivation, why did so many Afghans support the US government, fight for the US, fight for the Afghani government? Is it that they were the more liberal or modernity-influenced Afghans?

MD: I think if you're ruled by a power and that power asks you to fight, what are you going to do? Are you going to refuse to fight? If you're poor and you're offered training and equipment and an income to support your family, and the alternative to that is poverty or lack of a future, what choice are you going to make? You could think of it as a mercenary proposition.

The other thing is, in Afghan culture, it's a very tribal and divided society, so it's not uncommon for people to switch sides. This happened with the British [in India] and with the Dutch in Aceh. You get someone fighting on one side, they'd switch to the other side, not necessarily completely honestly. Sometimes people switch sides several times, so they may well find it pragmatically helpful to fight on the side of the government but may have no will to sustain the fight if the government wasn't winning. So, you join the side that you think is going to win.

So, I think it's quite complex. You would certainly have many Afghans who would hate the Taliban, and not want to give the Taliban power over their families and their wives and their children. That's quite legitimate, but to hate the Taliban and to fight them are two different propositions. You should only fight if you're going to win. Wars are about winning; they're not about negotiating truces. They're about who's going to be

the last person standing, and if it's not going to be you, and you don't have a conviction that you've got the ideological will to fight to the death, then the wise thing is to take off your uniform and mingle with the crowd. Absolutely.

ML: Do you think this was ever winnable for the United States, you used that term, "You don't go to war unless you're going to win." And I wonder – now we're all experts with hindsight – but when you look back over the last 20 years, do you think it was a fundamentally poor idea, misconceived for the US and Australia to go into Afghanistan?

MD: Well, they won the war, they destroyed the Taliban, and they eradicated Al-Qaeda, but they couldn't win the peace. So, it was a winnable short-term war. But then you must go and leave the country to the people you've defeated, or others like them.

The nation-building project was a mistake. I have some sympathy for America. They've been successful in nation building in Germany and Japan and South Korea, and they were used to manipulating states and they had the South American playground. But it's one thing to try to establish democracy in a Confucian society or in a post-Christian society like Germany, but it's another thing to try and introduce it in Afghanistan, or in Iraq. The irony in both cases was that in Iraq and Afghanistan the Americans introduced sharia-grounded constitutions. The Iraqi constitution had been secular under Saddam Hussein, but it became Islamicized under American occupation, but if you're going to take the sharia seriously, the Americans shouldn't have been there at all, because only Muslims should rule over Muslims: any other rule is not legitimate. So, it was a mistake. The problem is, the Americans didn't have any other framework: they could go in and fight the battle, but then to retreat and leave it seemed impossible at the time.

It's very interesting that in the early '90s, the Chinese did

a study of America. They asked, "What made America great?" These were Chinese intellectuals in Beijing. Their conclusion was that the American Constitution would have been unworkable without Christianity, and that is what made the structure of the democracy work. I think they were right. You can't just impose that [democratic] model.

The root of the problem is that West elites have a false anthropology. They have a false understanding of the human being: it's not a Christian understanding. They also, connected to that, have a false understanding of culture and how cultures work. The liberal West has a very naive view of human beings, which is that human beings are basically good, so for their flourishing, all you need to do is get rid of the obstacles, which are structural, systematic, political inequalities. The ideology of the age says that. So, you go in, and you get rid of obstacles for women to progress, you get right education, you set up structures, and then everyone will say, "Oh! That's what we wanted all along, and we're going to flourish now."

But sin is deeper than. It runs deeper than that. Some cultures have been deeply transformed by Islamic ideology, and that whole ideology is inimical to a democratic worldview. They underestimated the reality of sin, the fact that sin could be entrenched in culture, that you can't change that in a generation. It's a multi-generational process to change the ideology and character of a culture. And it can't be changed from the top-down; it's a grassroots process. That's how Christianity changed the Roman Empire: from the grassroots. There were top-down processes as well along the way, but it was really from the bottom-up.

I've had a few interactions with politicians and read the statements of the elites in government in the US. They really do have a universalistic view of human nature. It's a false view; it's not the one that made America great. Relying on that ideology has been a mistake. For example, I was speaking

in DC to an advisor to a senator. We talked at some length, and he said, "Yes, the view here in Washington is that religion is not a cause of human behavior. So, people fight wars over water, over women, over money, over power, over whatever, but they don't fight over religion." Religion is not a cause of human behavior, it's a symptom.

This was Marx's view: religion is the "opiate of the masses". Why is that? Because the rich want to exploit the poor so they use religion. So, religion is not the cause of the exploitation, it's the means of the exploitation. Feminists have a similar view. I'm a feminist in some ways, but some feminists hate Christianity. But they hate it because it's a tool of patriarchy. It's a means to manipulate and exploit. That whole outlook, which is so embedded in the West, is that religion is basically irrelevant – you see it in the writings of journalists who don't get religion. They don't get religion.

So, you spend a vast amount of money in Afghanistan, a graveyard of empires, trying to import an American democratic model into a culture and a community that just doesn't get that and is wired very differently.

You can point to lots of things the Americans could have done differently, perhaps dealing with corruption differently or having a more coordinated approach instead of many different powers doing different things in different provinces. But fundamentally, they could never have established a government that could have succeeded and continued after them. They were always going to lose to a religious group of one kind or another.

ML: It's interesting, I've been reading a Yale historian – you may have come across him – called Timothy Snyder. He's possibly not in your area of expertise, but mostly Central European. He's got a brilliant book called *Bloodlands* looking at Central Europe between 1930 and 1946. He's a bit of a

polymath, speaks all the Central European languages, comes from a Quaker background. He's done a lot of work on Russia and the Ukraine, thinking about totalitarianism. He's developed this philosophy of history or politics of history. He says there are two competing politics: one is the politics of inevitability, which has really dominated US and Western thinking. It's exactly as you described: it dominated US thinking, particularly post-1989: the fall of the Berlin Wall, end of communism – Francis Fukuyama's book – the end of history has come. There's an inevitability in the US Western mindset, particularly since '89, but probably since the end of the second World War. This idea is there's an inevitability to the triumph of liberal democracy. If you just remove the hurdles, every sane person and culture will inevitably choose this.

I look at what you've just described in Afghanistan. That is the politics of inevitability with a lack of understanding that it's not inevitable. Maybe it is a bit of a religious view, but it failed to consider the stubborn nature of reality. Then you contrast that with the politics of eternity. He uses Russia as an example. The politics of eternity is that history doesn't move forward. You're always cycling back to fight old battles to understand yourself. For example, he argues what Russia has done under Putin, and the philosophers who've shaped him post 2010, is cycled back to this idea of a thousand-year-old Christian Russia, God's innocent, pure, anointed, to establish, bring the light of Russian culture and the light of Christ to the Eurasian land mass. For a thousand years, they've been fighting endless attacks from pagans and Fascists. So, everything is always this eternal returning to the attack by the Fascists on the pure Russians, and Russia is always innocent; any opponent is always all-evil.

I was wondering about the sense of historicity and politics in Islam as you talked. I wonder if in an Islamic sense, there's no real future, there's no inevitability: it's always jihad.



It's always a return to this revivalist movement, a return to the sources. Islam is always pure. It's always designed to be successful, so we were always going to be fighting the infidels who occupy us, who oppress us. And that is just always going to be the case. There's never actually going to be any progress. Does that resonate in any way?

MD: Yes, that's the script. There are certainly Muslims who still look forward to the fall of Rome. They conquered four of the patriarchies of the ancient Christian world: Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and Constantinople, and there's just one more to go. It's also true that the jihadi sort of Islamic mindset is eternal. It has a very long view of history. The issue is not whether we kick out the Americans this year, it's that it'll happen within one or more generations. It's that sort of thinking.

You've got some Muslims in North Africa who say they still have the keys to their homes in Andalusia and are waiting to get back in there. Or the Palestinians who have the keys to their houses in Israel. That sense of history is shaped by the sharia and the predictions of the end times in which Jesus comes back and he destroys all religions except the sharia of Muhammad and destroys the cross. This is the Islamic Jesus. The whole world will be subject to Islam. It's a grand, timeless vision.

ML: Are we getting closer to that end time? Do they have a Tim LaHaye [author of the *Left Behind* apocalyptic novels] or a *Late Great Planet Earth* equivalent?

MD: The Iranians have. Some of the Iranians have. They look forward to the Mahdi coming. They see the signs and they want to be part of his movement. There are some apocalyptic visionaries. ISIS had this view as well.

But the problem with that program is that for centuries, it was failing. The Russians had 400 years of victories against

Islam, with very, very bitter wars on their southern borders. Then you have this revival movement.

The biggest problem for Islam is that wherever there have been attempts to reintroduce the utopian foothold of the future caliphate, they've failed. Most Iranians now hate Islam, since the 1979 revolution has shown them what sharia law does. Many Afghans fear the Taliban. The Muslim Brotherhood was expelled violently and suppressed in Egypt after decades of promising that "Islam is the solution".

Nowhere has there been a successful Islamic revivalist implementation that has won enduring popular support. It has produced poverty, brokenness, oppression, and pain. So, this Islamic grand narrative is in trouble. In some ways that drives the fury. If your whole theological basis is coming under attack, one response – it's the cognitive dissonance response – is to double down and be more determined in pursuing this fruitless goal, but you'll lose a lot of people along the way. That's why there are churches in Germany full of converts from asylum seekers who fled Iraq and Syria. They said, "If this is true Islam, we want to follow Jesus." So, Islam's going through the most profound crisis. The crisis is now not the defeat by the Western powers, but the failure of Islam to realize utopian promises.

It's a horrible thought, but in some ways, the best hope for Afghanistan is that the people react against Islam and reject it, but that won't happen if there are Westerners in there pulling the strings and controlling the political process.

ML: It won't happen so long as Westerners are in Afghanistan.

MD: That's right.

ML: So, the Westerners must leave, because that takes away the legitimacy of jihad and the constraints, doesn't it? So, you can see what it is. Give the Taliban free reign, let them try and roll out sharia and wait for heaven to come to earth, and

what you'll discover is it's more like hell?

MD: Let's see what paradise is like, yes. Because if you've got the infidels to fight against, you've got someone to blame for your sufferings. But now with the Taliban, different groups will be fighting each other. What happened when Iraq fought Syria is each side said it was a holy war, and they celebrated their dead as martyrs. That becomes incredible to people. It's incredible to Iranians. They don't believe that anymore.

ML: That their dead in the Iran-Iraq war were martyrs?

MD: Yes, whereas the Iraq dead are in hell. This is hard to sustain in the modern era. The Shiites and Sunnis have fought each other on that basis for thousand years, but it's hard to sustain. I think Afghanistan's a difficult country to bring peace to. As I said, it's a horrible thought. I know that, for example, Christian converts in Afghanistan are under enormous pressure. I'm sure some will be killed: there is a small but growing church there and it's tragic what they're going to face.

When President Carter embraced the Ayatollah Khomeini and welcomed the Iranian revolution, thinking he would bring democracy, I'm sure he had no idea that the outcome of this would be a vast apostasy with more than a million Iranians becoming Christians, because they could see how evil the sharia revolution was. You must really take a long-term view as to what's happening in the world, to look beyond these events, traumatic as they are.

ML: One of the things that strikes me is that modernity and the technology of modernity, the internet, is a genie that is out of the bottle, and you can't get it back in, in much the same way that the reformation of Christianity rode on the back of the printing press and the technology that came in with printing, and that changed the religious landscape of Europe.

It led to enormous violence and then, depending how you tell the history of Europe, some semblance of peace between religions.

I wonder, when I look at Afghanistan, and I look at Islam, is that part of what's happening, that the forces of modernity, of liberalization, are riding on the back of this access to information and that you can't sustain the view. And why I can't sustain the view, if I'm a Sunni, that every Shia person is going to hell and their dead are martyrs in hell. It's changed everything, hasn't it? I wonder, in Afghanistan, even the Taliban are on Twitter and on their smartphones: 20-year-olds, and 15-year-olds all have YouTube channels in Afghanistan. Do you think that's an impact? And how do you think that's going to play out?

MD: Yes, I think that's a huge shift. You've got the young adults in Kabul watching *Love Island*. They're looking at the world differently. There's no doubt about that. Someone shared with me that a bit more than a third of the school children in Afghanistan are girls now; women's life expectancy has gone up from 56 to 66 in the last 20 years, and almost a third of MPs in Afghanistan were women. So, women will have different expectations, so it's a very different proposition for the Taliban to be controlling Afghanistan now.

This is an issue in countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, that through satellite television and through the internet people access all sorts of information perspectives on the world, that would have been unthinkable, 30 or 40 years ago.

Islam maintains its control by keeping people on a need-to-know basis. I remember once saying to someone who'd become a Muslim in Australia that I had read the *Life of Mohammad* and the Hadith collections. And he said, "Oh, you shouldn't have done that".

ML: Really?

MD: Yes. There are two aspects happening in the Muslim world. One is realizing how other people live, and having a better understanding of the choices that are available to some people and maybe “not to me”, and “Why is that the case?” The second is, information about Islam is becoming much more available. Instead of someone just saying, “Islam is perfect”, and you say, “Oh, okay,” people are asking, “Well, why is it perfect? What has it brought me? What does it bring women? You tell me that Islam is good for women: what does that mean?” And “Oh, I read this about the life of Muhammad. Did he really do that? Is that really true?” There are questions that once you just never were able to ask.

One of the most striking things that my Iranian friends who’ve become Christians have said to me is that often in Iran, if you asked a certain question that would be uncomfortable for the teacher to answer, you would be severely rebuked. You weren’t allowed to ask questions. They all learnt that. They all learnt that questioning beyond a certain point was forbidden, but it’s hard in the modern era to stop people asking questions. That is a big challenge, I think, for these Islamist revival movements. They really need to exert a lot of control over information to maintain their power, and I think that’s very, very difficult.

ML: It’s interesting, isn’t it? It’s true of every totalitarian dictatorship-type government that they want to control the narrative, control what counts as true, what counts as fact. It’s Trump’s big lie: “The election was stolen from me.” I just tell this lie, and I repeat it, and I repeat it, and I repeat it, and you can build a whole movement around that kind of lie, because facts no longer matter. Islam has that as well: if you follow, if you’re deeply consistent and you follow sharia perfectly, you will be the most successful of all people, that sort of propriety – as you said, “success” – theology. You just keep telling the lie for 1400 years, but of course, you’re right, most Islamic countries aren’t



prospering.

MD: In fact, when you have people living side by side who only differ by their religion, Muslims do worse. Muslims are poorer than Hindus [in India], Bosnia is poorer than Serbia. In Muslim countries too Christians often do well, but not always. In Pakistan, they're suppressed like a low caste, but often their hospitals, their institutions are admired, and they become the elite. In Pakistan it's ironic that the Christians are oppressed but the Christian schools are some of the most elite schools.

So yes, Islam does badly. If you look at the Human Development Indices of Muslim states, they're very poor. It's interesting that Iran is doing better than many, but in Iran, you've got a population that are rejecting Islam: there is a cultural resistance to Arab culture and to Islam.

You can't lock up your women and expect your children to be well educated. You can't lock up your women and expect families to be healthy, with children who have sound, emotionally stable upbringings. You can't practice the guardianship process in which women are under the control of their male relatives, their brother or their father or their grandfather, and produce healthy societies. Wafa Sultan, the Syrian apostate from Islam, said that "The oppressed Muslim woman is the hen that lays the terrorist egg."

ML: Wow.

MD: I think there's a lot to be said for that. You get damaged young men if their mothers are not well. These are difficult and deep-seated problems for the Islamic world to face.

ML: Do you think this means we are going to see – as you mentioned, "laying terrorist eggs" –an uptick in jihadi zeal or revivalist zeal because what's happened in Afghanistan is seen as a great victory of Islamists and proof that Islam is successful: the great Satan, America is an empire in collapse

and Christianity is on its last ... on its knees, and now is the time, brothers to...

MD: Yes, it will give energy to that hope of world conquests and triumph. It's already happened once before. We can see how it happened. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the jihadis said, "That's because we defeated them in Afghanistan." There's a very famous book called *Join the Caravan*, which is banned in Australia. It took the authorities years to start banning Islamic texts in Australia, but this is one of the first ones they banned. In the introduction, it says, "We, the mighty mujahideen of Afghanistan, have defeated a superpower and other superpowers will follow soon. And look, we've now defeated the Americans: who else is there left to defeat?"

This will give energy and hope to groups in Indonesia, in the Philippines, in Bangladesh – to the radicals there – in Kashmir. Africa has a whole slew of different jihadi groups plaguing Mozambique and Nigeria. This is bad. It's set in a larger geopolitical frame too. The Chinese are saying, "You Taiwanese don't expect the Americans to stay with you, to stick with you when the going gets tough. They don't want a 'Forever War. They've told us that.'" So yes, there'll be an upsurge, and it's really worrying for Christians because Christians are often called "crusaders". They're identified with the West – unfairly because Christianity is an Eastern religion. They will be targeted. In fact, that's already happening, and the world won't notice it. They won't notice Turkey doing what it's been doing more and more. They'll overlook it. So, I'm very concerned for the intensification of the jihad. But on the other hand, as I said, the jihadis have never been able to establish a utopia yet, and over time that understanding will spread in the Muslim world.

ML: Here's a question for you that may be controversial. Do you think we should open our borders and our refugee program to try and evacuate and resettle any person fleeing Afghanistan and wants to get out now, should we let them in?

Should they come to the US? Should they come to Western Europe, the UK, Australia? What do you think about that? For anyone listening, I have no view at the moment on this, there's no agenda behind except genuine curiosity, because the fear on one hand is, well, if you're a thoughtful jihadi or maybe this is a good way to get into the US or into Europe, into Australia. You'll slip in and you can wreak havoc. Is that a real fear? What should we do? If you were the minister for Immigration, what would you do?

MD: Well, this is a complex question. There's no doubt that Europe is in great trouble and Bernard Lewis more than a decade ago said there will be majority Islamic states in Europe in this century because of immigration and then differential birth rates. I think Europe's in trouble. It will suffer a lot in the coming decades, as it reaps the harvest of its naive policies. Many of those that came were brought in, were brought in for economic reasons, guest workers to do all the dirty, dangerous, and difficult jobs that Europeans didn't want to do. Then you have the complication of falling birth rates in Europe too.

I must admit, I'm quite conflicted about this because I've been working amongst Iranian refugees who have become Christians in Australia for the last 10 years, and many of them are incredibly cruelly treated by the Australian government. It's like a perpetual abuse of these people. We have no idea. It hasn't reached the public's consciousness how badly we are treating these people, and that needs to change. So, I think we can't just have this policy of saying that "If you come here and we don't like you, we'll keep you forever as a sort of stateless person without settling benefits or support. And if you lose your job in COVID, then just starve."

ML: Yeah. It's terrible.

MD: This is not a good process. But at the same time, I think we should control our borders and not just naively accept

large numbers of people from cultures that are very different from ours. It's difficult because one of the ideological points of Western liberalism is that all cultures are the same. "They're all quite beautiful, and if you just throw them all together, you get this wonderful and rich, diverse, fruitful, melting pot of human thoughts and perspectives. Aren't we all basically good anyway? So, it's all going to be wonderful." That is so, so wrong, and naïve.

When you begin to talk about this desire to affirm humanity and all its diversity. I do think we should be careful who we let in, and I certainly wouldn't be saying we must accept anyone who is a refugee from Afghanistan. Certainly, there are some that we've somehow entered a relationship with, and they are being welcomed to Australia because they might otherwise be killed in Afghanistan, but I think we should be very thoughtful as to how we integrate those people into Australian society. I'm opposed to unlimited immigration. I think the Germans made a terrible mistake when Angela Merkel said, "We're open for everyone." But at the same time, treating people very cruelly in Australia is not the way to do that.

The Muslim diaspora is a big challenge for some Western countries, much less for Australia. The reality is in Australia, because of the government's policies, most of the immigrants that have been coming into Australia have been coming from Pacific Islands, Southeast Asia, India. Islam has not been a major source of immigrants here for quite some time. Yes, the future of states can be determined by the growth of Islamic minorities, and maybe France will one day be a sharia state. I think that's quite a realistic possibility.

I was once involved in helping some pastors with a vilification trial, and we approached a lawyer. The pastors' view was that resurgent Islam in Australia could be long-term a challenge for the nation. But the lawyer they were asking for help said, "Oh, that's a fanciful thought." I don't think it's fanciful. Nations shift and change through demographic

processes. Nations rise and fall. There are lots of nations that were once great and illustrious that no longer exist.

ML: Correct.

MD: The Jews are an exception.

ML: That's right.

MD: Will Germany still exist in 100 years? Perhaps not. Nations would be foolish not to have some sense of their long-term future. This is a problem for Western democracies because we run on election cycles, and if we don't have an ideological commitment to our own enduring future, then we are in trouble.

ML: This paradox takes us back to Timothy Snyder, the Yale historian, he says – and you've nailed it exactly right – that the politics of inevitability rob you of a future that needs to be constructed and owned by serious people thinking about serious alternatives, making choices, and that work can never cease. We can't just assume that Australia will always just go on, Germany will always go on. No, no, it doesn't. The future is constructed based on a whole bunch of choices that every generation must make.

MD: Absolutely.

ML: And we can't give up on that. That's vitally important. But as you were talking, I thought the great problem for us as Christians – and for humans – is that we must think at two levels. At one level – and I've seen that just in how you've described it – the level of the policy, the big sweep of history: in fifty years' time, we might think the fall of Afghanistan, the resurgence of Taliban, is the best thing that happened for that country. We can have a policy on immigration that says, "No, we want to control our borders" That's the policy, the big picture. But then actually, when you look at the very human level, you say, "You know what, there are people who are going to die tomorrow because of this." As a



Christian, we value the big picture, the empire building, the great civilization ideas, but also, we value the person who's standing at the airport in Kabul desperately trying to get out.

MD: Yes, we have a residual sense of covenant in our culture, that if you make a promise, you should keep it.

ML: Yes, absolutely.

MD: If you entice 27% of MPs to be women, you can't just throw them into the jaws of the Taliban and leave with your tail between your legs. You can't open up a society like that without being able and willing to follow through. So, I think this is a deep shame, and it's very, very painful to think about.

Can I just respond to something else you were saying? I think a nation does need a big idea of its identity and its future, and one of the things that's most troubling to me is that nations like America, European countries, and Australia have forgotten what had made us who we are, and we are marching away from it aggressively and rejecting its foundation. Now, one of its foundations is a particular understanding of the human person, that we are sinful, and that society needs to build in constraints to manage that. That's why we have a separation of powers. That separation of powers is because of the doctrine of sin. Islam doesn't have any separation of powers, and it doesn't have any doctrine of sin, and that's a huge world of difference.

ML: Hang on, hang on. Islam doesn't have a doctrine of sin?

MD: No. It sees sin as not a big deal. There's transgression, disobedience, not walking on the straight path, but it doesn't have a view that human nature is fundamentally sinful.

ML: Okay. So, if you want to obey sharia, you can. If you want to be a perfect human being...

MD: If you're rightly guided if there's proper guidance. If you're following proper guidance.

And it's not a problem for a sinful person to exist in God's heaven. Atonement is not necessary, and the view in the Quran is that human beings are born Muslims, actually. They're born innocent, perfect, and Islam's job is to make sure they receive the guidance that they need to stay on track. So human beings are weak and easily led astray and the state needs to impose the truth upon them. But there isn't this view that there must be checks and balances, in that same way, against the reality of human sin, that power can corrupt.

These perspectives have been lost in the West. So that's why I think the Americans fundamentally misunderstood the depth of the problem with sharia culture, and they felt that they could just liberate people and that would be that. It troubles me in the West that we've lost track of what are Christian foundations. I think the Chinese were right. Democracy makes sense because of a Christian base, but we've rejected the base, and as a result, our worldviews are populated by a host of lies about ourselves – about the world, about history – and we're trying to continue with these lies, these bad ideas that have gone deep: that all religions are the same, that we are just basically progressing, that future generations will be wiser and better than us. These ideas are just very mistaken, and they provide a very shaky foundation for the future. That does trouble me deeply. That troubles me as much as the rise of militant Islam.

ML: Right. Because, in the end, as Jesus said, "You'll know the truth and the truth will set you free," but you need to know how reality works if you want to order your life and live well. And reality is that, with human sin, we have an ineluctable tendency to mess things up and you must acknowledge that and write that into your politics and into your economics and into your understanding of life.

MD: Yes. Solzhenitsyn, after years in the gulag, said the line between good and evil runs down the middle of every human heart, and he was speaking about the guards in the gulag as well as the prisoners.

ML: Yes, that's right.

MD: He didn't make any distinction between them. There was no innocent party and no totally guilty party either. There was a battle going on for good and evil in every person. That awareness is being lost in our culture, amongst the elites. It still exists there are still Christians around who have a Christian world view, but they find themselves speaking a language and living in a world that so many people around them don't know of anymore and don't understand.

ML: So, what then, to quote, Francis Schaeffer's great book, "How then should we live?" If there's someone here who is maybe listening or watching this who wants to live as a follower of Jesus, what should we do? How do we respond to this in 30 seconds? Give us the answer, Mark. ...

The 30 seconds is a joke. Take your time

MD: We need to have a radical Christianity. We need to be bold about that and unashamed. We need to be comfortable to be different from the society around us. We need to resist that inner push to silence ourselves because we're saying something that people might think is politically incorrect or not in keeping with the mood of the times. We need an in-your-face capacity to hold our ground in the face of all the pressure in our culture.

We need to follow Jesus. We need to believe in the God who determines the destiny of nations. We need to believe in a God of miracles and a God who saves. We need to believe in the reality of divine judgment, of heaven and hell. We need to have confidence in our understanding of the political world. We need to have a commitment to a Christian view of marriage,

of freedom, of the human person.

I think one of the most important topics in all this is our anthropology. We need a biblical understanding of what it means to be human. That is where I think often Christians have lost the plot. They've bought into the view of the human person that's become dominant in our culture. Rod Dreher has written a book on radical Christianity.

ML: *Live Not by Lies*?

MD: Yes, *Live Not by Lies*. He argues that Christians in the West should follow the same strategy that Christians followed under Communism, which enabled the church to survive and flourish when Communism fell. Which is basically you go underground, you create communities, distinctive communities of faith that are separate from and in some ways at odds with the culture around them. You train people for persecution: you train them for authentic self-differentiation in the face of a society that's going in a different direction. *Live Not by Lies* has lots of helpful thoughts. I think every pastor should think about, "How can I train the children in our church for persecution?" That's a question that brings things into focus: "What does that mean: to be equipped, to be willing to suffer for Christ's sake, to speak the truth?" I think that's where we are now in Western culture.

ML: It's very challenging, because I suspect you're not going to build a megachurch in Australia on that basis. Sometimes I look back on my life and ministry and what I've done is tried to equip you for how to succeed in this culture – instead of being different, highly assimilated, highly enculturated – and there's this deep discomfort. Maybe it's just the context in which I have led churches – inner-city elites – the thought of not being part of that private school, university, economic, political elite is deeply distressing to many in our churches. The thought that ran through my head was if you were starting out your career, do you think you could have had the level of

academic success, you'd have a place in the Academy, holding the views you hold now and living this kind of distinctive life? Is there still scope and place for Christians to have roles of influence?

MD: I think it's very difficult. One of my dear friends was a leading publisher, and she's become a strong Christian. She said to me one day, "Look, I won't be able to continue in that particular space, doing books for children that liberal, secular publishers accept any more, because they'll be asking me to put certain themes into storylines and so on and I just can't do that."

In one sense, I left the Academy. I was elected to the Australian Academy of Humanities in 1992 when I was 34. I'm still a member of that, but I know that quite a lot of my other linguist colleagues there think I've lost the plot and become extremist. That is just what it is. I've counted myself fortunate not to be working in the academy over the last 20 or so years. I have a freedom to write and publish and communicate outside of that. I'm really thrilled to be part of a wonderful team at Melbourne School of Theology, which is teaching Islamics and seeking to train a future generation.

There was a window in time when I was able to exist in the academy, but and it's harder. Certainly, there have been Christians that have lost their jobs and found it difficult to function in that space. But that doesn't mean we should give up on it. We need to encourage Christians to get involved in politics, but to do that, to function in the elite, if you like, they need to be literate, they need to be theologically able to read the times and to position themselves well. So, I would encourage someone in your position to equip your young people to serve. We mustn't surrender the public square.

If we lose it, that's one thing, and we need to be ready for the possibility of losing it, but we shouldn't just walk away from it. It would be a crime to do that. In Jeremiah, it says

to the Jews in exile in Babylon to seek the well-being of the city in which they live, and we have a fundamental responsibility to engage and to do that, not to become separatist. It's a paradox: you prepare your church for persecution and to be a despised minority, but while you're doing that, you don't walk away from the responsibility of serving. This was Daniel's role: he was serving a pagan emperor, and even at the cost of his life, but he remained true to his own distinct identity and faith. We need that sort of Daniel spirit in this time. This is the time to think about what it means to be a Daniel in a waning West.

ML: Well, Mark, that's probably a good note on which to wrap up. I just want to thank you so much for your generosity, for your time and your thoughtfulness. I feel like we can sit and talk about some of these things for hours and hours and hours. Maybe we should do a bit more of that. I hope anyone who's watching this and who listens in finds this helpful and inspiring and will keep the conversation going and the movement of equipping people to live authentic lives, following Jesus from the inside out: everything we've got for the good of the city, the good of the country, the good of the world: that's what it's about. So, thank you very, very much for being part of this.

MD: It's such a privilege, Mark. I've really enjoyed talking about these things that are so important for us all.

[Watch](#) this YouTube video of the interview with Dr. Mark Durie.