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**FROM EL ALAMEIN
TO THE GREATER JIHAD TODAY**

**A talk by WILLIAM CONNER
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Ladies and Gentlemen. El Alamein was a battle in the second world war almost exactly 52 years ago, and Islam covers a very wide area stretching from China to the Atlantic. So where to begin?

I was born in Ireland in West Cork. My father was a direct descendant of the O'Connor of Kerry. In the 16th century Oliver Cromwell sent some fairly tough troops over there and a platoon of dragoons captured the O'Connor of Kerry and hanged him on Sheep's Hill, Killarney. Because he didn't hang very well he had his head cut off. All this was watched by his wife who had a small baby. She fled, and dropped the O off the name and became a Protestant in order to ensure the survival of the child.

So it happened that when I was about four or five the battle for independence in Ireland led by the IRA focused very much in West Cork. Our marvellous little village, Innishannon, had the bridge between Cork and the West of Ireland, and a great deal of fighting and killing went on all around that area. The police station was always called the police barracks. Our nurse would take us up occasionally to one of our fields and would scratch away the moss and show us the blood where one lad died after a skirmish there in the village.

Occasionally we had to sleep on the floor of the nursery because shots would come through the window. Then the big houses belonging to the people of the Protestant ascendancy (as it has often been called) began to be burned. I remember five houses went up in our village in one night. The flames crackling and the smoke was great excitement for us kids. It livened country life no end. We had a game, myself and my young brother, when he was about four and I was six. One of us would

run round and chalk up 'IRA' on the walls somewhere or other and the other would find this and cross it out and put 'RIC' (Royal Irish Constabulary). The fact that we got heavily spanked if we did this in the drawing room added spice to the game.

Eventually things got very hot. Our neighbour was shot, we had groups coming to the house at night, and my father felt that, with a young family, it was time to move. So we all left for England as refugees and for many years never saw our house or home again. When I arrived in England I spoke such a broad County Cork brogue that nobody could understand what on earth I was saying or where I came from. Not long after our arrival in England, an ancient aunt of ours died somewhere down on the South coast, and my younger brother's immediate question was, 'Who shot her?'

The only thing I will say about all this is that occupation creates a much deeper legacy than the wounds of war. This country was occupied last in 1066. Ireland was occupied up to my lifetime and in the memorable phrase of Peter Howard, 'The bottom has a very much longer memory than the boot.'

Now I want to jump to Cambridge, where eventually I became an undergraduate. Cambridge in the '30s was a glorious place with the old architecture and the lawns that had been rolled for 500 years running down to the Cam. I can't say that the lifestyle of the undergraduates had the same charm always, but it was a free and easy time. Hitler had appeared in Europe but the general feeling (I'm ashamed to say) of my crowd, and I think the majority, was that the whole thing would blow over with a decent amount of British common sense and the

passage of time.

There were minorities, however, who thought more deeply. The Marxists were quite a powerful force. They were very few, but a number of them became well known afterwards. Among my contemporaries were Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, Kim Philby, Anthony Blunt and many others. There was another small but interesting minority known at that time as the Oxford Group. Through my sister I knew one of these people who used to come to my rooms and introduce me to his friends.

This man asked me one day, 'What are you living for?', which took me back a bit. Later he said, 'Have you ever considered that a third of your life may have gone?' I did some rapid mathematics and thought maybe he was right. Then he said, 'You know, everyone is guided by something all the time. Have you ever considered that?' He moved on to the proposition that there was a supreme intelligence who created billions of people all down history, quite different in minute detail, and that maybe he had a purpose and plan for each individual. There were various snags to this proposition. I told him I'd never heard of anyone being guided by God, but he said, 'Maybe you haven't fulfilled the conditions or spent much time trying to be,' which of course was true.

He then made it plain that this had to go with an audit of my life, because I wouldn't get much guidance from any source if the major things guiding my life were my girlfriend or my car. I had a marvellous 1927 Alvis 12/50 and that was the most important thing in life. You have no idea of the effect of that old bus going down King's Parade with the colleges up each side. You'd change down and scatter the mob with a noise like a

Zeppelin. It was tremendous for the ego. So the car was high on the list, also my future career, marriage, and money if any. By this time I was thinking seriously about making an experiment, and one day I actually did. I got hold of a notebook and a pencil and, as this friend suggested, I got up earlier than normal and tried to make my mind available for some form of inspiration or perspective.

To my great surprise I soon got a very clear thought, which was that the main thing guiding my life was what people thought about me, how to be popular, how to be in with everybody. And that led fairly soon to a thought about drinking alcohol. I didn't like the stuff too much, but one had to drink to keep in, even though I never had the money for my rounds really. (I played in the college rugby team so we normally had dinner together.) So I made the decision that I was no longer going to be run around by what people thought. I would stop drinking. That was fine for about two days, and then at dinner one night the captain came in. He had had a drink or two already, and he called out, 'Drinks on me tonight!' A waiter came round and I said, 'I'm not drinking.' Soon all hell broke loose. Tumblers banged on the table and this fellow shouted, 'If Bill doesn't have a drink, nobody has a drink!' All very embarrassing! But I didn't lose any friends through that decision at all, in fact the exact opposite. I don't think they all understood what I was after but many of them supported it. Incidentally we had the Scottish fly-half in the college which may have helped the fact that we managed nicely and thought a great deal of ourselves. Many of them were lost in the war, others went on and did interesting things. One of the wing three-quarters became the

Governor General of New Zealand.

The second notable thing that happened to me at Cambridge had to do with a rather good pub next to the college called The Eagle. If one had nothing to do, someone would surely suggest, 'Let's go round and have a drink at The Eagle.' One night I said, 'No, I've got some work to do'. So I pushed off to my rooms, which actually looked down on the courtyard of the Eagle. The chaps were arriving and the fishing fleet of local girls who turned up for good company on these evenings was gathering in a very welcoming manner. I was thrown into a great heart-searching. 'Am I chucking up everything that's interesting in life and going after a spectre?' For two hours a tremendous turmoil went on inside me. I don't know why, but it ended in a remarkable way, because I prayed that night when I went to bed, and made a decision that as far as I was concerned I was not going into the market for sex from that time onwards.

The extraordinary thing was that I very soon found myself getting much more interested in other people, and in even bigger things as well. I began then to have an experience which I think the psychologists call sublimation. Many of the creative people in history have found that this tremendous drive of sex doesn't have to pre-occupy your mind. It had obsessed mine for long periods. It could be part of a great creative development in one's life.

Now that is about the end of life of Adrian Mole!

To jump now to the World War. As you remember, Hitler attacked Poland and the British sent an army over to Europe. Then the 'Blitzkrieg' came and caught

everyone unawares, the Maginot Line turned out to be no good and the great French army went down. The British army was defeated thoroughly, though of course we got a lot of the troops back to Britain from Dunkirk. But then Churchill did a remarkable thing. We were up against it. Hitler was planning an invasion, we had practically no defences, people were running around looking for pikes and things. Churchill sent the one and only British armoured division in the country to the Middle East. Why? Because he saw it was going to be a long war and whoever got hold of the oil supplies was going to win it.

Not long after going down from Cambridge I joined the Royal Armoured Corps and after a bit of basic training we were sent out to the Middle East, to Cairo. There was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing along that North African desert before I got there. General Wavell had an army there when the Italians arrived. Then the German Afrika Korps came over, and that stiffened up things a lot. The whole of the British army was rattled off back eastwards, practically into the Egyptian delta. I arrived in the middle of all that and it was a horrendous experience. Then came Monty. People have many different views and opinions about him, but what he certainly did do was turn the whole thinking and morale of the British Eighth Army around. He began by going round all the hotels and kicking out any officers on leave who hadn't anything good to say for themselves. He stopped the whole concept of being taken prisoner for one thing and he said, 'We've got a historic job to do. Up to now we haven't won anything in this war. We either win this or we lose the lot.' And he somehow, almost single-handedly, inspired people in the most

extraordinary way.

The desert was a remarkable experience. I believe the area fought over was two hundred thousand square miles. It certainly looks like that in its vast flatness. On the other hand it has lots of escarpments, valleys and wadis, and you can have your enemy near to you without knowing it in no time. The tank was very much the weapon of that particular part of the war. It was a remarkable life. During the day it was way up over a hundred degrees normally, at night sometimes cold. The camaraderie was tremendous. People were totally equal, there were no badges of rank worn, you took leadership without them. The flies were terrible. If you brewed up a cup of tea you couldn't get the thing up to your mouth without swallowing half a dozen flies. They were unbelievable, but of course the dead were not easy to bury in the minefields and so on. However, I don't think anyone who was with that Eighth Army, and who survived, can regret the experience.

On the day when the British attack began there was a good deal less chatter and badinage, and a certain apprehension. We knew that we were opposite the 21st Panzer Division, and everyone just had their imagination to work on as to what the whole thing was going to be like. I remember the quartermaster coming up, a chap you never saw because he was down at the headquarters. But he turned up with his truck to collect all letters, envelopes, addresses, cap badges, anything that might be found on a body and give away who your unit were. Being an Irish regiment, we had a badge with an angel and a harp on it, and you can imagine the ribaldry about where the next issue was coming from.

In due course night fell and we had to advance in

line. There were four huge minefields each half a mile deep, two British and two German. These were going to have lanes cleared, hopefully, and we were going to get through. After we had advanced about two miles, suddenly the most colossal barrage broke out. Eight hundred and eighty-two British field guns went off and continued to fire for about half an hour. The whole sky was lit. Then as we got up near the German positions they stopped and we were in pitch darkness. It was a difficult business trying to keep far enough not to smack into the tank in front, and close enough not to get left behind, in which case you were utterly lost. Navigation was a very difficult thing in those days. If you got out of touch you really were out of touch. That particular night finished with the four tanks in front of me in a line all knocked out. They set up a terrific illumination all around and we were silhouetted completely. Thank goodness we got orders to come back soon after that.

Next day we had to go in and make the ground in daylight. We were supposed to have a barrage, which didn't in fact come. Up to now I had felt thrilled to be part of the war. It fitted in with my picture of myself. But on this second day we came under fire from some highly effective German 88mm anti-tank guns, and the tanks around me began to go up. A tank is a horrific sight when it really gets hit. It carries about 150 gallons of petrol and the whole fighting chamber is full of high explosive shells. After a direct hit, people don't normally come out alive.

When this began to happen around me, and we were obviously stopped, I suddenly found myself paralysed with fear. I had always felt I wasn't a very fearful person, but here I was now totally unable to think, I

considered praying, and then I thought of this proposition that I'd started in Cambridge, of putting my life under new management and seeking direction for it. 'If God is here at all He will presumably function under these conditions.' In a flash, nothing less than a miracle to me, I found myself absolutely clear-minded and able to think for the whole situation. In gun practice you learn to aim beyond the target, then behind it, then the direct hit. The safest place is where the last shell fell. I got the driver immediately to go up on the next shell that fell in front, knowing the next one would be well behind. We moved around and in the next 45 minutes we survived, in spite of one or two minor hits. Eventually we came back having lost 15 tanks in this short period. That personal liberation altered the war as far as I was concerned, and has remained one of the big experiences of my life. I'm rather ashamed that I haven't expected that sort of answer to come to me under lots of other circumstances since then.

The first four days of El Alamein were a terrible slugging match. 39,000 people were killed, and the chaos was unbelievable. I was a humble tank commander and you don't know what's going on at all at that level. Back in our lines in the quiet of the night I heard a radio in a nearby truck, so I walked across. Someone had got the BBC and I suddenly heard that in Britain they were ringing church-bells, and there had been a great victory in the desert. I could not believe that this monumental chaos that we'd been part of was anything to do with it.

Later the war spread out and we had a very interesting role moving behind the Germans and stopping their transport getting away back. One night we were down near the sea. The silence was total, under

a great dome of a sky with its bright stars. I remember thinking we might now get back home, and I found myself saying, 'If I do get back, I must find something dealing with the root causes of what's wrong in the world,' because clearly this war wasn't going to do it.

Eventually I did get back. The thing to do in the army is to marry the colonel's daughter, and this I did. Then I had to consider my career, what we were going to do. There were a lot of very interesting jobs coming up then if you had a university degree, but you had to move fairly fast. What was clear to me then, though, was the absolute priority need in the world for a group of completely available people, fully committed to being open to the will of God for this shattered world. And I didn't have much difficulty, nor did my wife, in deciding that this was where we should try and find a part. Partly because my wife speaks very good German, we were invited to go with a big force of 200 into Germany while it was still occupied under the military regimes. That was an extraordinary experience which I won't stop on. And later we went to South America for two or three years.

I was back at a conference in Europe and suddenly I was asked, 'Can you go to Cairo? You know Cairo. There is an urgent need there,' which was to prepare the way for a big international force that was coming westward round the world, starting in America with a play *The Vanishing Island*. This expressed vividly the choice in front of the world, which was largely at that time Communism and anti-Communism, or a free world and what that would take. A slight snag was that the show was already at Karachi, heading rapidly for the

Middle East, so two or three of us went out, somewhat apprehensively. In fact President Nasser received the 240 people travelling with the play, and they were government guests for two weeks. *The Vanishing Island* played in the famous Cairo Opera House.

That was the beginning of a 38-year relationship with the Arab countries, going and coming and getting to know people on all levels. I'm grateful to have had the chance to meet some of the great men of the Middle East. Four of us were guests of King Faisal in Saudi Arabia for two weeks, which was an amazing time. I think he was one of the very greatest men and it was a terrible tragedy when he was assassinated. We were invited by the Prime Minister of Iraq. We met leaders like Kuwatly, Gaddafi, Arafat, but much more the people behind them. We also came to know the Sheikh Al Azhar, who was a very great supporter of this work. Al Azhar, as you know, is something like the Vatican for most of the Islamic world. The last personality I will mention is Boutros Ghali, who is now Secretary General of the United Nations. I've known him since soon after he went with Sadat as his Foreign Minister on the famous journey in 1977 to Jerusalem, a pioneering act from which much else has followed. I'm not mentioning these names just as name dropping, but to indicate the response there has been to a thinking such as Moral Re-Armament offers.

There are 46 countries in the United Nations with an Islamic majority. Islam is the fastest growing faith, I believe. In the West there is very great ignorance of it. That was certainly true of me. When I was at school, you learned about the Crusaders being attacked by the

'infidels'. The first Muslim I ever met socially was a young doctor in Cairo when I was there in the army. He had just set up a practice in Alexandria and got married. He was in Cairo on a visit and we had been introduced. It turned out that what he wanted to discuss was a plea he had received from a charity. This charity had developed a big rehabilitation village which was designed to train people to treat and prevent tuberculosis, which was rampant in Cairo. The only snag was that they hadn't got a medical officer, and he had been asked if he could do it. There was practically no salary attached. He said to me, 'I want to do God's will. What do you think it is in this case?' So we sat quietly, and soon my mind was filled with the one question, 'He's seeking guidance from Allah, I'm seeking guidance from God: is it the same thing?' Anyhow my friend broke the silence by saying, 'That's time enough: I'm clear now. I should take that job in the village.' And he did. I can tell you I was very challenged and humbled. I didn't know that this doctor, Abdu Sallam, was going to play a big role in his country's life later. He was a very effective and well known Minister of Health under both Nasser and Sadat.

I learned so much from Abdu Sallam over the years, for example that Jesus and Mary are the only two people the Muslims recognise as being without sin. Then there are the five prayers a day when people stop whatever they're doing and face Mecca. Even if you are in a railway station at prayer time, you see crowds of people praying. I learned too about the golden age of the Arab world when the Islamic peoples from the Middle East brought the scientific and philosophical learning which formed so much of the basis of our European

Renaissance.

Today, westerners often think of violence as connected with Islam. In some cases there is a lot of political violence going on. I think it is incorrect to see this as very much to do with Islam as a whole. That would be the same as seeing certain actions by the IRA as a condemnation of the Catholic Church. What is much more serious is the mistrust and deep doubt about what the West is giving to the world. You may ask why. From the Muslim perspective, the West has produced Fascism and Communism, and now a market economy with no adequate social and moral backbone. It proliferates profiteering, drugs, pornography, and its satellite TV programmes encircle that area.

Now to move to the Jihad. Jihad, the holy war, springs I think from the Arabic word 'to strive'. Mohammed fled from Mecca and was followed by his persecutors to Medina. Then there was a big battle, and the Muslims were few in number. They actually won, but as they came out of the battle Mohammed said, 'That was the lesser Jihad. Now we must embark upon the greater Jihad, which is the battle against selfishness in ourselves and throughout the world.'

Here are some words by Professor Ibish who is an Islamic thinker, formerly at the American University of Beirut: 'The question of Jihad has been misunderstood. The greater Jihad is fighting our animal tendencies, internal rather than external, striving in the path of God to overcome one's animal side. To fight these dangerous tendencies and to cultivate the spiritual potential in each one of us is the true and greater Jihad.'

To conclude, Islam, Christianity and Judaism have an extraordinary amount in common. The world is small

and getting smaller in terms of communications. The answer may have to be looked for in our spiritual traditions and I don't think it will come from politicians. Maybe the basic factor is the commitment of individuals to leave space in their life for the higher wisdom of the inner voice. I believe it is that commitment which produces creative minorities, and creative minorities determine history.