

A HUMANITARIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE AUTUMN OF OUR DISCONTENT

It has been a painful year for humanity. The attacks of September 11, 2001, were one of the greatest manifestations of the indignities that man is capable of heaping upon fellow man. But as we look back upon that tragic day and engage ourselves – and one another – in reflection and contemplation, more sober thought should be dedicated to the yet unseen consequences of those events. We are moving towards confrontation and aggression, uncertainly if not all of us hesitatingly. Yet we surely owe it to the innocent thousands who died on that day – and all those who have died since – as well as to future generations – to take a step back from that awful brink.

As a Muslim I am deeply offended and embarrassed that the perpetrators of this massacre had the audacity to describe themselves as Muslims and as having claimed to have acted in the name of Islam. What a gross indignity to the almost two billion Muslims that inhabit our planet.

Long before these terrorists hijacked the planes that crashed into New York and Washington DC, I believed that we needed an enlightened centrist platform based on inclusion where men and women of goodwill shared in their common humanity.

Since last September 11, the human family has endured many indignities, all the more tragic because all were avoidable: suicide bombings in Israel; the systematic slaughter of men, women and children in the Indian city of Gujarat; nuclear brinkmanship in a region that ought to be concentrating its energies on education, poverty alleviation and development; violent vigilantism that has lead to racist murders of innocent people on the streets of America; and the murder of civilians in the Palestinian Territories.

The new millennium echoes with the familiar cries of hatred, anger and violence. My greatest fear is that if we continue to depend on the rule of force, on power, as a deterrent, we will eventually be unable to disable violence. We must become more sensitised to the concept of consequences: the consequences of poverty, illiteracy, oppression, lack of opportunity, despair and anger, which can all

lead to the contemplation of violence. To my mind, as a citizen of the world, intolerance, prejudice and bigotry can also be seen as forms of illiteracy and ignorance, eroding social values, eating away at our humanity and stamping on our sense of ethical obligations and duties – to one another and to the world as a whole.

If the world cannot grow beyond the new ‘tribalism’ of ‘regionality’ or unilateralism that has developed apace over the last year, we are going to face a very uncertain future. However, if we can search for commonality through a dialogue of universal values, and establish a code of ethical conduct, we could perhaps achieve the security that safeguards human dignity and enables the fulfilment of human needs through solidarity, ridding society of its erroneous need for individuals who seek to terrorise us.

This one act of terrorism must not allow us to degenerate into automatons under crude banners of patriotism or religion. “The greatest challenge lies not in enforcing stability through military might, which can never succeed in the long run, but in building security through foreign policies that address the political roots of terrorism”.

The Islamic ethical ideal is based on the premise that all of creation is somehow organically and spiritually interconnected. In the Islamic concept of *Tawhid*, or Essential Unity of Creation, this is acknowledged as a fundamental tenet of faith. If you were to go up into space and look down upon a Muslim world where everyone is prostrating five times daily towards one focus point, you will notice concentric circles that symbolise this essential unity, this interconnectedness, this irresistible inter-existence of humanity. This is my Islam. This is pluralism and respect for diversity.

As Moderator of the World Conference of Religions and Peace and President of the Club of Rome, I represent idealists with a holistic approach. We share ‘a common concern for the future of humanity’, acting as ex-officio catalysts of change. This global perspective is essential to wise leadership given the intense interdependence between nations in this new age. Given the ultra-sophistication of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), this is no time for provincial ideologies that cannot grasp the complexities and

nuances of contemporary mores and challenges – the political, social, economic, technological, environmental, psychological and cultural problems of the ‘world *problematique*’. It is crucial for us to maintain an educated, multi-disciplinary and long-term perspective on policy choices that determine our destiny, limiting evils like poverty and prejudice through expanding the boundaries of knowledge. The world cannot afford anything that falls short of that mark.

What we need is to bring certain unacceptables to an end – war, terror, violence and disregard for the inherent dignity of humanity.

We must therefore learn to work together globally, recognising our common ground. This means respecting the sanctity of life that is inherent to all faiths. People of all faiths and none must recognise a sense of our shared history on this one fragile planet that we inhabit together. That should motivate us to move towards a new human agenda for a better world of compassion, reconciliation and understanding. At the very least, we have to evolve a civilised framework for disagreement; at best we must aim to attain a common perspective for global initiatives and global response to times of crisis.

It is my personal hope, obviously shared by millions, that never again we will see something as tragic as the billowing smoke that enveloped the collapse of the twin towers and all who were in them last September 11. We are going to be seeing reruns of that surreal sight for a long time to come and it should serve not just as a symbol of a heartbreaking day, but also of a tragic schism in humanity. It is also my hope that the twin towers will be replaced, not just by the exquisite towers of light that were first conceived to fill the horrible void where they used to stand, but also by a common perception of the twin concepts of civilisation and culture. That would mean that we had finally risen above the hostile energies revealed on that day, to a higher plane of insight into the steps to be taken to ensure our shared future.

The Qur’an calls on us to observe: ‘the perpetual change of winds...the alternation of day and night...the variety of human colours and tongues...the alternation of days of success and reversal

among peoples...’ and to reflect on our part in the completeness of creation that is beautiful in its diversity.

What a glorious bridge to eternity it would be for all those we lost on that day, September 11, 2001, and those lost since, if they were each remembered as the souls who lit our humble, human steps towards a deeper understanding of each other for final peace.

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