

PLEASE MAKE SURE YOU HAVE RECORDED OUR PRESENT ADDRESS
AND CROSSED OUT OR DESTROYED ALL OLD ONES. THANK YOU!

How the third world (and especially the Arab world) sees us)

2 Bd Abbane Ramdane
Oran, Algeria
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Dear Friends:

We received a number of Christmas letters referring to the hostages in Teheran and the burning of the U.S. embassies in Pakistan and Libya. Almost all were written before the invasion of Afghanistan. Some were wondering, "How can they do this to us? Why should such hate and distrust be aimed at us?" One specifically asked us if we could shed any light on such events. These events, after all, did occur within the Muslim world, although they have no direct connection with the particular country where we are living.

These questions seem to aim at something beyond the immediately obvious, but we can at least list some of the obvious elements before going on. 1) The U.S. helped establish the Iranian sovereign in full power and gave him strong support throughout his reign. 2) The now deposed ruler was trying to force exceedingly rapid economic change upon his country without heed to the accompanying rapid social change for which the overwhelming majority of the people were quite unprepared and to which the religious leaders were strongly opposed. 3) The wide scope of the opposition and the depth of its bitterness, fueled by years of severe repression and many instances of torture, were far greater than the U.S., the Shah, Amnesty International or almost anyone else had realized. Beyond that, and in the light of events in Afghanistan, perhaps the former questions should be placed in a broader context. Many of our Canadian and West European friends, for example, could join Americans in asking, "How can there be so much third world fear of Western 'imperialism' and seemingly so much blindness to the dangers of Russian militarism and communist domination?"

We won't attempt a direct answer, nor even an analysis of the implications of the question itself. Instead, we'd like to suggest a different approach--trying to see ourselves through the eyes of others. In preparation for that exercise, think of Luke 6:37-42 (the speck in our brother's eye and the log in our own) and Mt. 23:13-33 (Jesus calling the Scribes and Pharisees, the religious leaders of his day, to see their own hypocrisy--a prerequisite to repentance) and also these famous words of Robert Burns from his poem "To a louse":

Oh wad some power the giftie gie us
To see ousrels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us
An' foolish notion.

This preparation in humility is important, for it is truly a difficult undertaking to try honestly to see the world through new glasses, colored NOT with our own cherished experiences and prejudices but colored with a whole new set of filters, which, in this case, means the experiences and feelings of the masses in Africa and Asia (and to a certain extent Latin America). It becomes all the harder for us when the gaze is no longer fixed upon the impersonal "world" but upon us and our beloved heritage. Our natural reaction is one of immediate self-defense, rationalization, self-justification, bringing counter arguments to bear. That sabotages the very purpose of the exercise, which is to listen to the other, to feel his hurt and to try to understand his vision of things even when we are convinced it includes a distorted image of us.

Many missionaries have been in a painfully privileged position for this kind of exercise, living much of their lives as "foreign Westerners" under the close scrutiny of non-Western eyes and having close contacts with some of the harsh realities of the third world. In addition, they usually have opportunities to develop relationships over the years with missionaries from various other parts of the globe and to cultivate a wider interest in the "feelings" of others in situations and cultures different from ours in North America and Western Europe. In any case, based on our limited experience, we can only offer to share with you in attempting to see ourselves as others see us.

Now, we of the West usually see ourselves as defending the principle of political freedom enshrined in democratic or republican institutions and set it over against a system of dictatorship and repression aggressively preaching revolution. This conception of the situation has had little meaning for the bulk of the masses in Africa and Asia (and parts of Latin America). Most of them have never really experienced a free and open political system and have little conception of what that involves. Moreover, they have seen us frequently allied with dictatorial and repressive regimes in their own and/or neighboring countries. In any event, they usually have almost no interest in politics unless and until someone convinces them that politics can be a useful tool in relation to their one and only real interest--a very fundamental kind of economics. They desperately yearn to be lifted from being virtual serfs of the 20th century to being persons whose toil can at least assure them the basic necessities of life and an education for their children. Radical economic reforms, especially land reforms, have far greater appeal for these people than any political theories, however idealistic. At best, these masses tend to see us as uninterested in their real concerns and unable to speak to them in any meaningful language. At worst, they succumb to the full gamut of communist propaganda and see us as the devil incarnate, viciously opposing their one hope of attaining a better life. That is one of the hard lessons to be learned from the tragic experience in South Vietnam.

Many of us Westerners frequently think of ourselves as also defending certain basic spiritual values and a cultural tradition that has some of its roots in the Judeo-Christian heritage. This we can easily oppose to the atheistic, materialistic ideology of doctrinaire communism. Large numbers of non-Western people, on the other hand, tend to see the other side of our culture, of which we are keenly aware ourselves at times. In the most extreme forms of this vision of the West, we are the most crassly materialistic people in the world, interested

only in creature comforts and a fast buck (or make it a few billion through the multi-national companies), to which is added the fear that we may contaminate the world with our spreading social and moral degeneracy. The Iranian leader seems to have communicated that image to the masses with little difficulty. It must already have been there as a latent reality in the minds of his people.

Sometimes communist propaganda uses such upside down, backward or twisted logic that it appears laughable. However, when an equally distorted logic seems to underlie spontaneous outbursts against the West coming from the third world, then it must be taken seriously. Such was the seemingly ludicrous conviction that America was the instigator of the attack on the mosque in Mecca (clearly contrary to American interests), a conviction that led to the attacks on the U.S. embassies in Pakistan and Libya. It would have been far more logical to have assumed a Russian-backed coup although, as it now appears, any Russian involvement must have been pretty far in the background. The frame of mind that led to such a far-fetched conclusion and to the embassy burnings is surely related in part to the images of us already mentioned.

A slight digression seems appropriate at this point to note that the bulk of the third world simply did not see the communist world as a very serious threat before the invasion of Afghanistan. The takeover of Eastern Europe and the crushing of local liberalizing groups in Hungary and Czechoslovakia were of great concern to us in the West but far removed from the interests and concerns of the third world masses. Later interventionism elsewhere was often seen as merely helping indigenous groups struggling to free themselves from Western colonial domination. Only fairly recently, after the Soviets turned against their former friends in Somalia and Eritrea and supported the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, did a significant number of third world people begin to feel uneasy about the activities of the Russians. As for the Chinese communist experiment, it was largely turned in upon itself, and insofar as its excesses were known, they were seen as mild in comparison with what they replaced; and the final result seemed to be a vast improvement in the lot of teeming millions of China's impoverished people. Only Indonesia showed panic related to the direct threat from Chinese communism, and that threat was effectively removed in a massive purge (1965-66).

In contrast with this, most of Asia and Africa had a very direct and immediate experience of colonial domination at the hands of Western countries over periods of time ranging from 50 to 350 years. The phasing out of that colonial era did not begin until after World War II, so that humiliating period is still of relatively recent memory. Moreover, the white minority governments of Rhodesia and South Africa served to keep that memory vividly alive. Incidentally, that era also included the African slave trade in which America was so deeply involved.

Many feel that the humiliation of the colonial period lingers on in yet another way. Former colonies, now politically independent, find themselves continuing the economic ties of dependence created earlier with their Western rulers or "protectors." In most cases, their trade runs heavily to almost exclusively with the West; and in that relationship they are the weak and the poor while we are the strong and the rich. Through such relationships they tend to feel varying degrees of fear or resentment or both. In fact, most of those now speaking of Western imperialism and neo-colonialism usually do so in the context of what is also called "economic imperialism." The Eastern block, not having the psychological handicap of either past colonial domination in those countries or present intensive trade with them, has been able to pose as the champion of the rights of the oppressed and the friend of the toiling masses. They willingly offer their presence and varying amounts of aid as a counterweight to heavy dependence on the West.

The oppressive hand of colonial history has been most keenly felt in the southern part of Africa, and from there have come the firmest accusations of hypocrisy leveled at American foreign policy. Portuguese rule in Angola and Mozambique was the longest in colonial history and unsurpassed in ruthless exploitation and brutal repression. Yet Portugal was a respected member of NATO; and the U.S. and other Western countries never showed any real, serious concern for the fate of the Africans until the Cubans came to help already strong Marxist rebel groups establish themselves in power. Almost overnight, America took the lead of professing great concern for the fate of the poor Africans in danger of communist domination! Even many anti-Marxists were embittered by a concern which they felt was too hypocritical as well as too little and too late.

Most of the foregoing also plays an important part in how the Arab world looks at the West. However, in this case the situation is further complicated in the extreme by the Palestinian situation. Most Arabs, Christian as well as Muslim and non-Palestinian as well as Palestinian, tend to view the West through an additional filter that one could call their historical "litany" of betrayals. In skeletal outline, that litany goes something like this:

World War I--The Arabs helped the allies against the Ottoman Turks, fully expecting their complete freedom from the Ottoman rule as a result. However, the secret Sykes-Picot agreement of 1916 between France and Great Britain set out how the two powers would divide up the Arab world into protectorates and mutually friendly spheres of influence.

1917--Britain's "Balfour Declaration" announced the principle of making a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine. This followed many consultations with Zionist leaders, but the Arabs were not consulted although it was their land that was being offered.

1917-World War II--In spite of a whole series of British promises that the creation of a Jewish national homeland would NEVER lead to the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine, the British continued to allow Jewish immigration in collaboration with Zionist leaders, who had never hidden their determination to create nothing less than a new and completely Jewish state. It was that avowed purpose which made the Arabs bitterly opposed to any really massive Jewish immigration.

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End of World War II--Following the Nazi holocaust with its unspeakable suffering inflicted upon European Jewry, well over 100,000 of them, mostly herded into "camps," were desperately waiting for the chance to emigrate from Germany, Austria, Italy, and Poland. Zionists claimed they nearly all wanted to go to Palestine. Some other observers, especially Arab, were convinced that many, and probably most, would have preferred to go to West European or North American countries. Unfortunately, that debate will remain forever purely academic. The Anglo-American Commission of Inquiry admitted in 1946 that only a trickle could get into such countries because of immigration regulations. Instead of making any effort to open Western doors to the survivors of the holocaust, it was decided to give out 100,000 special certificates for emigration to Palestine. For the overwhelming majority of refugees, it was clearly a choice of Palestine or stay put. Throughout this period, the Palestinians and other Arabs continued vehement protests as in the 20's and 30's but all to no avail. They have been repeatedly asking ever since, "Why should a tiny segment of the Arab world be forced to swallow such massive immigration, which would finally make possible the fulfillment of the Zionist dream of a Jewish state on Arab land, when the problem was created in Europe and when the very Western powers backing this solution could easily have absorbed most of these refugees in a vastly larger territory and population?"

1946-48--For more than two decades, the Palestinians had been seeking the right to self-determination. That right had consistently been denied them. Then the UN decided to IMPOSE its plan of "self-determination" on Palestine AGAINST the clearly evident will of nearly all Palestinians and other Arabs. At the heart of the plan, of course, was the partition, which was gerrymandered so as to give a maximum amount of territory with more than a 50% Jewish population. The roughly 40% Arab population within that area would find itself a dominated minority in its own native land. Almost all the Arabs rejected the plan; and when Israel declared her independence as a state, the neighboring Arab countries attacked...and then lost the war.

1948-80--While always maintaining that the 1947 UN resolution on the partition of Palestine gives her an "unassailable" legal basis for existing, Israel has continually ignored and violated most of the later UN resolutions on Palestine and is still continuing colonization of the West Bank in dramatic and open defiance of the spirit of the Camp David agreements and world opinion. Nevertheless, Israel continues to receive the massive support of the U.S. in particular and the West in general.

For many Arabs from Iraq to North Africa and the Atlantic, some such "litany" of betrayals still dominates their thinking about international relationships; and they see us as the betrayers. They feel the West is as responsible as the Zionists for creating the "Palestinian problem" with its history of suffering for the Palestinian people, who were totally foreign to the "Jewish problem" and the Jewish sufferings in the West. The frustrations and resentments of between two and three million refugees who cannot go "home" are vented almost as much against America as against Israel. Equally deep bitterness and frustration mark the lives of ~~million~~^{SOME} others still living in Israeli-held territory. None of them can forget that Israeli weaponry is mostly American financed, when it is not American made, and that these weapons are used in Israeli commando raids, pre-emptive strikes and reprisal bombings, causing far more victims in the civilian population alone than all Palestinian terrorist attacks and commando raids put together. A minimal awareness of current events keeps the plight of the Palestinians in the thinking of most of their Arab ~~countries~~, who continue to see the situation as a humiliation for the whole Arab world. *Cousins,*

It is usually an unpleasant exercise to try to "see ourselves as others see us." It is an important one, however, if we want to be honest with ourselves and become a bit more sensitive to some of the powerful psychological forces at work in our world. But what then?

If we were living under repressive regimes without freedom of speech and political rights, all this would be no more than an exercise in heightening feelings of helplessness and frustration. As members of relatively free societies, however, people in the West have individual responsibility for the way their societies live and act, having a right to active participation in those societies and some influence, however small, upon them. If that responsibility is recognized and coupled with a conscience moulded by the commandment of love for one's neighbor, then further questions seem in order. How seriously have we sought to learn how others feel and how their lives are affected by our lifestyles? How earnestly have we prayed and how meaningfully have we committed our energies in terms of a consuming passion for justice for others as much as for ourselves, and in terms of the ministry of reconciliation in situations of conflict? How diligently have we prayed for brotherly love to fill our hearts and worked to discipline our lives as disciples of the law of love in our daily relationships?

As we face these and similar questions, may God be our guide in our quest for honest answers and more faithful discipleship.

Fraternally yours,

David and Carol BUTLER
and family