

Lord Taverne, QC

Tolerance and Fundamentalism

Ladies and Gentlemen, I believe that the idea of transforming today's date into a day to celebrate tolerance is a wonderful idea- it seeks to transform regret for the past into hope for the future; to turn tragedy into a positive response to a past marked by danger- the best qualities in our society.

I want to examine the nature of the threat from fundamentalism. What is fundamentalism? By definition it is the strict adherence to a belief that some sacred texts are the literal expression of the word of God. In practice, it is the belief that the words of the bible or the torah or the qura'n record truths which cannot be questioned and which endure irrespective of any evidence that contradicts them or any change of circumstances that make them out of date.

Let me start with the total opposite- the polar opposite of fundamentalism, as set out by the 17th Century philosopher, who could justly be called the father of liberal democracy, John Locke. No one in my view has more eloquently stated the case for tolerance and the avoidance of dogmatism. Now he wrote, and this is a memorable quote in my view,

"Since it is unavoidable to the greater part of men, if not all, to have several opinions without certain and indubitable proofs of their truth, it would methinks become all men to maintain peace and the common offices of humanity and friendship in the diversity of opinions, since we cannot reasonably expect that anyone should readily and absquiesly quit his own opinion and embrace ours. For where is that man that has incontestable evidence of all that he holds or the falsehood of all he condemns".

Now it is worth remembering that quote especially if we consider the great variety of religions in the world. There was an Anglican priest, David Barrat who spent forty years counting and cataloguing the different religions in the world.... And he established that there were over 10,000 distinct religions. And that listed Christianity as just one, when in fact Christianity alone has some 33,380 different denominations. Now it is a sobering thought that many followers of these religions believe that their religion or their denomination represents the true view of God and indeed some regard the beliefs of other religions as the work of satan.

But let me turn to the dangers of fundamentalism and the harm fundamentalists have done and still do. Now ofcourse all recent attention has focused on Islamic fundamentalism. But I think that it is worth bearing in mind the harm caused by others.

First, Jewish fundamentalists. They allow no rational doubts to question the absolute truth and divine authorships of the torah. Well a few years ago, the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote a book in which he said:

"In the course of history, God has spoken to mankind in many languages; hrough Judaism to Jews; Christianity to Christians, Islam to Muslims. Truth on earth is not nor can it aspire to be the whole truth. No one creed has a monopoly on spiritual truth".

Now these are admirable sentiments which ofcourse closely echo those of John Locke. But they were promptly condemned by a group of Orthodox jews as heresay for daring to suggest that different religions had something to learn from each other. One rabbi cited a verse from 'Proverbs': "The name of the wicked will rot".

Now the influence of Jewish fundamentalists may seem limited, yet it might be argued that they cannot be compared with Islamic ones. Yet few can deny that the root cause of conflict in the Middle East is the jewish settlements on Palestinian land, especially those in the West Bank. And how are these justified? By reference to the book of deuteronomy, I quote:

"For ye shall pass over the Jordan to go over the land that God giveth you and you shall possess it and dwell therein"

What was written in the Old Testament thousands of years ago is invoked to justify seizing land on which Palestinians have lived for centuries. These fundamentalists have done enormous harm to the cause of peace and tolerance.

Next an example of the harm done by Christian fundamentalists. American Evangelics, unfortunately supported by the Catholic church have succeeded in enforcing on UN agencies their view that contraception is a sin. As a result, family planning has virtually disappeared from the agenda of aid agencies in Africa. In Uganda, for instance, which is making very good progress in the fight against AIDS through the distribution of condoms, and where the birthrate had dropped to about three per woman, the birth rate is now over seven. The incidence of AIDS is again increasing. And despite the increasing incidence of AIDS, Uganda's population is likely to increase from 25 million to some 120 million by the middle of this century.

And a similar story is unfolding in Niger and Chad and a number of the poorest African Countries. Now this picture makes achievement of the millenium goals absolutely impossible. Women's education will suffer, in fact it will regress. All hope of making poverty history will be gone. Poverty, hunger and disease will increase. I regard this particular manifestation of Christian fundamentalism as a crime against humanity which arguably will do more harm than Al-Qaeda can ever hope to achieve.

Ofcourse the example of fundamentalism uppermost in people's minds is that of Islamic fundamentalism., for which you will hear more later. The harm it does is well-known. But I believe that it is important not to confuse the issue of fundamentalism with others. It has been wrongly identified with the so-called "war on terror". It has been entangled with the Iraq war and the so-called war in Palestine. But if peace were to come to Palestine or to Iraq it would not stop Al-Qaeda or the Taliban or the fanatical theocrats who run Iran. They were there long before the Iraq war and were little concerned at first with the affairs of Palestine. The struggle against Islamic fundamentalism (I think this is an extremely important point) is not one of a military war but one of ideas. The Islamic fundamentalists want to convert the world into a kind of medieval, totalitarian intolerant vision of society based on their own narrow fundamentalist interpretation of the Qura'n. And this enemy can only be defeated by the opposite vision of a democratic, tolerant, secular (by which I mean) non-theocratic vision of Islam. And that vision is not one that Christians, Jews,

Muslims or even humanists alone can promote. We must leave that to our Muslim colleagues who have been the driving force behind this initiative today, although we must do anything we can to support them.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I must end by citing the example of one of the people that I admire most. I am a humanist. He is a priest. He is Archbishop Desmond Tutu. I twice had dinner with him in South Africa in the dark days of apartheid. He is the most charming of men. One story he told was of how he liked coming to London and would always ask a policeman the way to Trafalgar Square when he was within sight of it. And the reply always came: "Over there Sir". But as a black South African, he explained, it was just so wonderful to hear a policeman call him Sir.

Now I hope that we haven't forgotten the struggle against apartheid. It was also a struggle against violence and intolerance. Some of the opponents of apartheid were as violent and inhuman as its defenders. They came to liberate South Africa with their necklaces; a horrendous practice of forcing tyres around those they suspected of collaboration, filling them with petrol and then setting them alight. Now Tutu at great personal risk to himself led the fight against this practice and intervened time after time to save people (often his own opponents) from the gangs and their necklaces. It was because people like Tutu and Mandela fought intolerance and autocracy with a message of democracy and tolerance that they won people's hearts and minds that apartheid was finally defeated. One day, I trust a democratic and tolerant Islam will similarly prevail.