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On reading faith: How do we read religion?

"When all else fails, you can always tell the truth"

Quote: Professor Abdus Salam Nobel Laureate.

All religions are blessed and cursed by their particular revelations and holy texts. These texts, which the faithful read or listen to, expound, reflect - set in the stone of sacred conceptualisation insights, intuitions and the consequent ethical projects and obligatory conduct derived from readings of faith. They do not, nor can they, express the silent midnight fears and doubts, the sudden joys and fluid epiphanies that visit us with grace and grant us a level of serenity beyond words. Music can suggest this deep realisation or ecstasy of the spirit, art may touch on it, poetry too, but our holy texts are fashioned, some might even say, hardened by a thousand interpretations which are necessary but not sufficient. Thus reading our faith or religion through the texts given us - through the Bible, the Qur'an, the Torah, the Bhagavad Geeta, through the traditions, the sutras, the myths of origins and endings which continue to have power over the faithful - is a delicate task calling for intelligence, subtlety yes, but also simplicity and humility. The great Christian mystic, Thomas a Kempis wrote in his marvellous book, *The Imitation of Christ*, several centuries ago:

"Indeed it is not learning that makes a man holy and just, but a virtuous life makes him pleasing to God. I would rather feel contrition than know how to define it. For what would it profit us to know the whole Bible by heart and the principles of all the philosophers if we live without grace and the love of God? Vanity of vanities and all is vanity, except to love God and serve Him alone."

All of us, people of faith and no faith, could do worse than ponder on this wise advice. Thomas a Kempis tells us not to affect wisdom but face up to our abiding ignorance. We can *know* too much and never know well enough.

We all bring our own enigmatic histories, our own psychological ticks and tricks to our readings, we are supported and undermined by our communal understandings of our holy texts. We all bring to our readings a partiality we can never escape entirely. But I do believe we can choose to read ironically, to be aware that we are limited creatures, with limited understanding, that we will inevitably get things wrong, that no matter how luminous and divinely-inspired, how radioactive a holy text may be, it comes to life when we engage with it with the intelligence of the heart. All this, I believe, should make us think again when we read our religions, and think again....always. We should handle all certainties with immense care, truth is not easily conceived and absolute truth is inconceivable to finite beings such as ourselves.

Thus we are bound to read our faiths with consideration and intelligence - of course we approach them from a particular perspective, as I have said we carry with us baggage that makes us both impassioned, alive, and blind. We are all tempted to fence in the vast ranging spaces of faith and the sky of spirituality with partial readings; we set up divisions so that we may stamp ourselves with identities of purity and shame, with exclusive superiorities that claim special knowledge so that we may justify our beliefs and actions no matter how oppressive, cruel or destructive. God knows his own and we - the faithful - are

inevitably His own, to hell with the rest. This dangerous divisive thinking is justified by crude readings of our religions and I think we can all agree that this practice is a major source of anguish and danger in our interdependent and rapidly globalising world. We need to think again, we need to read again, to remember who we are when we are alone in the dark of the midnight hour, when we are set adrift in the domain of shifting and changing dreams as we enter sleep.

A guest at a wedding I recently attended, a charming Dutch ex-banker who was sitting next to me at the wedding feast, asked my why is it that Muslims are not standing up and saying "NO not in our name" to the extremists or radicals who carry out appalling atrocities in Europe in the name of Islam. I found it difficult to give him a glib answer. Of course Muslims protest against acts carried out in the name of Islam by terrorists mired in potential and actual catastrophes they do not understand entirely, but these protests don't capture the by-lines of publicity; the sensation-hungry media is keener on screening the flag-burning rants of rampaging crowds shouting hate-filled slogans - and if they are Muslims all the better. As the American novelist Don DeLillo points out, we are all fascinated and intrigued by catastrophes or by the construction of catastrophes-about-to-happen when we see it on TV, and so we read our nightmares through the spectacles performed by Others.

I can say with confidence that Muslims in general are as appalled as non-Muslims at the potentially terrible during the first weekend of July 2007 but their concerns were given a ten-second viewing on BBC 24 News on the following Sunday night. Muslims in the UK are caught between the rock of their real and perceived grievances and the hard place of public distrust and obloquy. How does one rise above the group paranoia and delusions which stir, which churn up different communities who feel aggrieved and enraged? How can one mediate so-called strong religion with some more reasonable reading of faith? There is a such a degree of prejudice against Islam and Muslims and vice versa, there is such a degree of bad faith between Muslims and non-Muslims, such lack of trust, such a degree of denial by Muslims who are not prepared to examine their faith critically, their cultural and political attitudes, but non-Muslims also are blinded by their own prejudices against Muslims whom they regard, certainly covertly - never mind the soft rhetoric of integration - as the ultimate "Other"; Muslims are regarded as the ultimate barbarians not only at the gates but within the body politic. Prejudice is an invisible but effective shield against self-examination that would enable people to acknowledge the extent to which bad faith plays a role in Western incursions in and invasions of Islamic lands especially the Middle East, ostensibly for their own good. There are many instances of this terrible collusion in the disasters that we witness all over the Middle East. Let me give one example by quoting the former UN Middle East Envoy, Alvaro de Soto who said in a confidential report that the halting of direct funding to the Palestinian government and the freezing by Israel of the monthly tax revenues due to that government has - and I quote him - "...effectively transformed the Quartet (that is the USA, the UN, the EU and Russia) from a negotiation-promoting foursome guided by a common document - that is the road map for peace - into a body that was all but imposing sanctions on a freely-elected government of a people under occupation as well as setting unattainable pre-conditions for dialogue." This observation was made by a UN official and not by some Islamist ideologue.

As Islamists avoid looking into the failings of their own values and governance within Muslim societies, so we in the West are not prepared to face up to our own collusion with the

forces of repression and terror in the Middle East. All parties are motivated by bad faith, by poor excuses and by poor readings not only of the demands of their own faith, but also by faulty readings of the faith and motives of the so-called "Other". We like thinking well of ourselves and badly of anyone who does not resemble us - thus there are Muslims - as there are Christians - who believe that only good Muslims, or indeed, good Christians will be saved on Judgement Day, therefore it is the duty of Muslims...or Christians to convert the heathen. This attitude - I am tempted to say "symptom" - leads to absolutist thinking not capable of change; faith and the world are read by such people with monochrome certainty. So how are we to overcome this impasse? How are we to learn to read our faiths and each other more intelligently and more ironically?

This is a difficult call. How do people change attitudes, how do we replace prejudice with engagement? At one level - we can make a choice - we can choose to think and act differently in the context of our global responsibilities, we can choose to set aside our sense of superiority and difference and try to understand what motivates other people, to understand the back story of their actions and ours, and the unforeseen consequences that follow - we can choose to read history with intelligence and proper irony. We can, as the late Richard Rorty put it, we can embark on the project of living together by an act of imagination. We learn about others, according to Rorty - and I quote, by "the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers This process of coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them' is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of re-description of what we ourselves are like." Some may regard this as a sort of hopeless idealism in which academics and philosophers are prone to indulge in. Private Equity pirates, Hedge Fund hunters of profit, vociferous Commodity Traders in the City dealing in billions, risking and raking in the dollars, will no doubt smile at this hapless naiveté; they know that success in this world, the amassing of fortune and power is not done through communal piety but by acts of greed. Greed makes the risky world go round. Politicians and public servants too, who are practised in the nonchalant art of rhetoric, who rejoice in the humdrum machinations of power, are likely to slip behind the habit of benign - often false - public utterance for the public good and shake their heads warily as they plot a smile or two at this simple-minded plea for common understanding. I don't have to cite the extremists who are hell-bent on achieving their aims by mainly foul means. The realist description of people, they would all argue, is that we are unredeemable and self-seeking as groups and as individuals. I believe it is an over-narrow view of humanity which rationality to a mechanistic process governed by genetic drives computed into self-interested survival susceptible to mathematically-inspired prediction, a sort of democratic but generally fatalistic disavowal of moral responsibility. This is another, less congenial, reading of the new religion of the secular age where the human is reduced to an individual modelled on a machine whose behaviour can be predicted by computational logic. Symptoms replace causes, and human experiences of sorrow, depression, bereavement, loss and solitude are explained under a medical model whereby these existential moments in our lives may be medicated back to 'normality'. Efficiency replaces humanity, performance targets become the shibboleths of measuring success - even of birdsong! Reason is reduced to rationality which can be regarded as the technology of reason. This new religion of the free market creates a powerful system of social control in which society is becoming more rigid and stratified, and politics has given way to financial markets and our freedoms are jeopardised not only by the so-called 'war on terror' but also by free-wheeling international financial markets - this, in turn, has led to corruption on an immense scale as we have seen in the dramatic bankruptcies of super

corporations such as Enron and the recent failure of the sub-prime lending market in the USA recently.

I do not buy into this mechanistic vision of humanity, I am still persuaded by the economist-philosopher, Adam Smith, who wrote about the importance of "moral sentiments" as the glue of societies. Eamonn Butler, the Director of the Adam Smith Institute, described moral sentiments in this way, I quote: "Smith [held] that people are born with a moral sense, just as they have inborn ideas of beauty or harmony. Our conscience tells us what is right and wrong: and that is something innate, not something given us by lawmakers or by rational analysis. And to bolster it we also have a natural fellow-feeling, which Smith calls "sympathy". Between them, these natural senses of conscience and sympathy ensure that human beings can and do live together in orderly and beneficial social organizations."

We live in communities, this implies that we have obligations towards each other and the greater society - by that I mean not only the political states we live in, but also within the global society which is developing with great rapidity; we are answerable to each other. The nay-sayers may remark that just because I quote the father of capitalist economics does not mean I am right. Adam Smith was a product of his time when morality still had a romantic ethical and philosophical basis rather than the so-called scientific one to which we subscribe today. But I shall persist and rely on Smith's reading of our nature.

All our readings - of our faiths, of others, of politics, of what makes life worth living - must, I believe, at least be imbued by Adam Smith's "moral sentiments", of conscience and community, which are not particularly Western but are the nearest values we have to the universal - I repeat if we are to live intelligently on this hard-worked planet of ours, we must remember that all of us are interdependent and accountable for our actions and our thoughts.

I feel this is the least we can do in tribute to the victims of that terrible day on the 7th July 2005.

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London
7 July 2007