

Challenges to inclusion

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At seminars and conferences, we are all for inclusion. When we are back in our workplaces and neighbourhoods, when we discuss with friends and relatives who are eager to climb the socioeconomic ladder, then our sensible, liberal and all-inclusive views may be gone with the wind. We become ‘armchair socialists’.

Using a few examples, I will today reflect on how willing we are to discuss with people and groups we disagree with. Do we really mean to be all-inclusive, or is it just a way of talking? Where do we leave the militants and extremists; can they too be included? Can we even be friends with those we disagree with?

On Monday, I had the opportunity to attend an interesting seminar in Islamabad, organized by a new organization called Pak Institute for Conflict and Security (PICSS). But except for a few speakers, the rest mainly wanted us to know how right they were, and how wrong ‘the others’ were – even though history would tell us otherwise.

Typically, we think that the militants and extremists cannot be included in discussion, debate and discourse. They are just to be eliminated and gotten rid of, using military might if needed. But I believe that unless we engage in discussion and try to understand the causes and purposes of militancy and extremism, we cannot find solutions – and we will have to search for the solutions *together*. Concluding the seminar, Akram Zaki, the chair of the PICSS seminar wisely said that unless the world becomes more equal, fair and with better opportunities for all, we will fail to solve the problems of militancy and extremism.

We must learn to listen to those we disagree about big and small issues. I remember one of my male secondary school teachers in Norway who disliked a woman minister’s policies in the field of children, family and gender equality. He used to ridicule Berte Rognerud who was a government minister: what would she know about the field she claimed to be expert on, having no husband and no children. He did not have to agree with her, but he should not have behaved as an ‘everyday extremist’ either.

“I disagree deeply with all you say. But I will fight till the bitter end to make it possible for you to express your opinion”, a famous philosopher has said. And the things that upset people most are not the most important; they are usually social, moral and cultural issues. In those fields we want to believe that our way is the only way. We may become quite unreasonable and just stop listening to each other.

Last weekend, Pope Francis experienced that; the cardinals and bishops did not have the open mind he had expected, with more inclusive views regarding modern life-styles, including divorce, the opportunity for divorcees to remarry, the acceptance of same-sex unions, and other social and moral issues. The Pope seemed to say that the Catholic Church should not point fingers and exclude fellow human beings from the sacraments and communion. But *including* wouldn’t necessarily mean *accepting*. It would mean to refrain from *judging*. Instead of engaging in a confrontational debate, the Pope wisely said that he would have been more worried if the bishops had accepted the new ways wholesale without debate, just because I said so.

A week ago, the chairman of the ultraconservative Swedish political party, the “Swedish Democrats”, Jimmy Åkeson, who won 13 percent of the country’s parliamentary votes last month, announced that he was taking leave of absence on medical grounds. He felt burnt out after having been party leader for more than a decade. True, it is a strange party, which in many ways is antisocial, militant and extreme. He argues for less immigration to Sweden, which has 20 percent foreign-born inhabitants. And he is accused of having racist inclinations, and indeed many of his voters.

I don’t say that we should accept many of Åkeson’s political values; but I think the policy of excluding him from ‘polite conversation’ is wrong. After all, his party is a ‘daylight’ political party, not an underground

group. I believe that all issues can be solved through debate within the country's system. It is when communication breaks down, that we must be worried. It is when political groups go underground, we must be scared. In Pakistan, I believe that there must be open discussion lines with all political and interest groups.

In the West today, the extremists are on the far right. Earlier, until a few decades ago, the left and the far-left, the socialists and communists, were often seen as extreme and unacceptable by Western regimes, indeed in USA. But many of the left's values would have improved the often free-wheeling, antisocial and cruel capitalism, based on right-wing views. It is only through debate that we can find common ground and new ways.

You cannot beat a child to teach him or her to be kind, a friend used to say when he was speaking at seminars about peace and reconciliation. You cannot force anyone to think like you, especially not militant and extremist groups. We must try to understand why extremist groups develop, and why some people are attracted but not others. The groups are small and few. We should be thankful we were not attracted ourselves, or any of our family members and children – because that could have been the case, too. We should feel sorry for those who joined because they are also victims. But we have no right to write them off.

We must let those who think differently, in certain ways, be allowed to do that. We may even need to help them to do so. Yet, there are limits, too: we must never allow violence; we must not accept that people step on others, or use others, to achieve more or less justifiable goals. And we must always talk and debate, shape our attitudes and strategies throughout life. Many things will be constant, but in many fields we will learn till we grow old. We may disagree on certain things, but we human beings agree on most things in life, and we empathize with others, especially as we get to know each other better.

The road away from militancy and extremism can only be made as we walk it, yes, with a good understanding of our destination, and of how to behave along the way. Leaders and the rest of us must all realize that the right values are easy to learn, but sometimes difficult to keep. Children know what is fair and right, but we sometimes forget much of it when we grow big – in spite of all religions reminding us of what we should do to save our soul.

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