

Learning to live together

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After the tragic terror attacks in Paris last week, we remain shocked, sad, angry and bewildered. In some ways, the world will not be quite the same again and the actions that will be taken to safeguard security for the powerful and the powerless, the majority and the minority groups, will be many. Paradoxically, whereas that is meant to expand the freedom to speak, believe, or not believe, and live in pluralist and diverse societies, in some fields it may lead to limitations and restrictions. We may become more careful about the way we express our opinions, how we live within our own group or groups, and how we mingle with others. It may lead to less communication rather than more in the diverse and multicultural Europe and elsewhere in the world.

Yet, we also know that it is only through learning more about each other that respect can be gained, walls pulled down and bridges built. Impulses from others, within the same city, country or further away can only enrich us, even if we disagree. More knowledge and communication make us more open-minded and flexible; we will learn that human communities throughout the wide world have many commonalities, but they should also have many differences. We should aspire at living so that we don't hurt others, or so that only the few can have success at the expense of others. We should not force our standards, our religion, our culture and our way of life on others – and others should not do it to us.

If these are key aspects of the definition of a good society and life, with the right values and behaviour, then many of us have done wrong and sinned today and throughout history, as individuals, groups, states and civilizations. Can we learn to live better together, with those we agree with, and with greater acceptance of 'the others', those who are and want to be different? Are we also thinking of the causes behind the attacks in Paris, or do we only think of ourselves – that we are right? Do we mean that we will put learning and communication on the agenda so that we can – sometime in the future – live more peacefully together on the globe, in greater harmony and understanding?

History is indeed full of the opposite in the economic, cultural, religious, and other fields; there was always struggle between groups. The rulers and opinion leaders define what is right, correct and 'in'. The law has never been neutral, but it is getting better, and much of the 'class law' is gone. Yet, in most countries, well, everywhere, the law reflects the prejudices and the opinions of those in power. That applies to gender, ethnicity, religion, culture, moral standards and more. Behind the law is the Zeitgeist and mindset at the time in question.

We have universal human rights, made after the tragic experience of the Second World War when racism, anti-Semitism, and many other forms of intolerance was common and accepted far beyond the Nazi ideology. We know that without racism, the settlement of the 'new world' and the colonial era would not have been possible. We also know that democracy, 'one person, one vote', is a new concept. In the former colonies in Africa and Asia, in some cases just about fifty years ago, there was certainly not much democracy and equality, and that was on the watch of the Brits, French and the other colonial powers. Today, they all tell the young states what the right standards are.

In Europe and America, women only gained the right to vote about a hundred years ago. In America and South Africa, people lived under formalized segregation and discrimination just some decades ago. It was all sanctioned by the laws of the lands, justified, too, by the pillars of society, the

custodians of moral standards and the leaders of the church. We have little to be proud of as for tolerance, pluralism, inclusion and the ability to live in peace. The Westerners should remember that now when we take the moral high ground after the Paris tragedies. We are

Historically, religious leaders, the upper classes and various establishment groups in any society have often been against increased *liberty, equality and solidarity* – the motto of the French Revolution in 1789. They have often argued that it would shatter the order of society. The lower classes, the deprived and downtrodden, had to fight for a fairer share. Immigrants and other minorities can learn from how the workers parties and labour unions in the West fought for the rights of the lower classes. Rights are not handed out but fought for and earned.

Religious leaders were not wholeheartedly for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) since they felt that their role, and that of their religion, would be diminished with stronger secular standards. I am not a specialist on Islam's history, but I know that this pertains to Christian leaders, albeit not to Christianity. Today, it pertains to most Muslim leaders, but not to Islam. We should try to understand religious teachings separate from cultural traditions.

When analyzing the tragic terrorist attacks in Paris last week, we should remember such historical aspects as those I have drawn attention to above, and much more. And we should gain through and concrete knowledge about the current situation in Paris and France. It is too easy to say that “Je suis Charlie”, that we are all like the victims of the French magazine ‘Charlie Hebdo’ and the others, as the slogan became after the attacks. It is also a fact that the majority society in France expects foreigners and sub-groups to assimilate and become French, not just loosely as the Brits would be more willing to accept, but deeply. Part of the explanation is that the French are very patriotic about their culture, as they should be, yet, within limits so it doesn't become arrogance and intolerance, making pluralism and multiculturalism impossible. Was some of this the reason for last week's tragedy?

Again, historically the West has little to be proud of as for pluralism and multiculturalism. In future, Europe must do better, and we must realize that ‘our way’ is not the only way, and we must become more modest and careful about how we criticize, make satire and ridicule those who are different. We must become more sensitive when we cross the unwritten laws for good behavior and how we speak – about religions, cultures, values, ethnic groups, and more.

Today, the Westerners have more democratic traditions and more open mindsets than others, but it isn't perfect and infallible, and some are ultraconservative, semi-fascist, too. We all need to learn how to live together and find new ways to develop peacefully communities for all, and that means it cannot always be on the terms of the strong and the majority. The minorities must seek positive ways to gain fuller rights similar to how the lower classes, women, ethnic minorities and others fought for their rights in the West. It must all be done non-violently and peacefully, yes, better than the ‘old world’ did it when they were almost ‘alone’ in their lands.

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