

En Route

Religion, media and the economy

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In our time, it is not uncommon that local news items are broadcasted worldwide, made into international news. Other news items are truly international. In this article, I shall discuss a few items about religion, media and the economy, with emphasis on the moral foundation and superstructure of society. We all have a duty.

Let me begin with religious news. After all, this is the holy Easter week, one of the major feasts in the Christian calendar, marked in memory of the crucifixion of Jesus (Issa). Muslims do not believe Jesus died on the cross. However, forty days after Easter, Christians and Muslims mark Jesus' ascension to heaven. In both religions Jesus is a prophet, and Christians add that he is the Son of God, which many believe literally. The term was commonly used for particularly spiritual and holy men at the time.

A few weeks ago, at the end of the forty-day (symbolic) fast in the Christian calendar, the new Pope Francis was elected. He has already emphasized that he wish to be a pope for the poor and needy, as every religious leader should be. Just after the new Pope was enthroned, to use an outdated and royal term, the new Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby was also enthroned and became the head of the Church of England and the Anglican Communion worldwide with eighty-five million members in 38 provinces. Over four hundred years ago, the British King Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church and the Pope is not its head. Some of the Anglican churches are named Episcopal churches.

Archbishop Justin Welby at his inauguration emphasized the importance of focusing on the global poverty and economic crisis in our time. He stressed the importance of human development and our responsibility for the environment as God's custodians of the creation. The Pope and the Archbishop had quite similar messages. But the Archbishop, with a background as an oil company executive before he became a prelate, used more prosaic language.

Let us hope the two leaders will do well in their high offices, especially in creating dialogue with opposing groups within the church and separate religions, indeed with Islam. If Islam had a more centralized leadership, the dialogue might have been easier.

Religious issues are important to people, but in everyday life, economic and social issues are often placed higher on the agenda. In Cyprus, the banking and economic crisis has come into light during the last couple of weeks. In Greece and elsewhere, the austerity measures cause unacceptable difficulties for ordinary people. Middle-class families slip into poverty over some months.

This happens at a time when the world's resources, including our knowledge and skills, are at its pinnacle. How come we are not able to find ways of sharing the enormous wealth that the world has? How come that many important issues are not quite on the political agenda? The prelates have put some of them on the religious agenda. But it is the responsibility of the politicians and political scientists to make them into politics. And it is the responsibility of ordinary people to do so through democratic political parties, labour unions and other groups. Only then can we find solutions.

The media, politicians, religious leaders, and most of us are often preoccupied with issues of lesser importance. In the last week, particularly in the USA and France, the debate about same-sex relations and the institution of marriage has been given major focus. But the debate should instead be focused on bread and butter issues to make life bearable for ordinary people, not being judgmental on private moral and social issues. There must be more important issues to spend time on!

Also, the time and space the media gave to the election of the new Pope and Archbishop were too much. And if the media focuses on something, we all talk about it, and we think it is important. Well, ordinary and

poor people have little time for such things; they are too busy making ends meet, and may feel saddened that the media and the public debate is about less important issues.

In Pakistan, we debate the election procedures. We talk about personalities in the various political parties, and their more or less opportunistic changing of parties. We spend a lot of time gossiping about politics rather than on serious debate and analysis, searching for practical solutions. We seem to look at politics more as advertising, trade and entertainment. Political and other leaders must create optimism and hope, they must work with people, and they must be honest and sincere in their efforts.

Is it important that the retired General and President Pervez Musharraf has come back to Pakistan? I don't quite know. What would be important is that a former head of state can live in his home country. But there is no logical reason why he again should get into power, which seems unlikely in any case. It may be interesting to listen to him; he is a good speaker and may well have practical proposals. But generally, it is a waste of time to give much media attention to him.

Besides, we all know that Musharraf's rule harnessed Pakistan's far too close cooperation with America on the so-called 'war on terror', which has led to today's major security problems and the economic difficulties the country faces. Former presidents should give advice and live well, but not seek power again. We must get away from the old thinking of 'once in power, always in power'. That also applies to other fields in society and to the mindset of the upper-classes. It is not about personalities, heritage and names; it is about finding workable, honest solutions for betterment of people's lives. We need regulated growth, sustainable development and redistribution of wealth. It is all about people's participation and people having a stake in society. That will go a long way to make everyone optimistic, reducing extremism to little or nothing.

In order to succeed, the media, religious and economic leaders must contribute. They can provide major inputs to make the superstructure sound, with the right moral, social and economic foundation and practical means for the country. They can help us all set the agenda so that we can debate the important issues in the right way. Politics is very much about prioritizing.

I have recently had the opportunity to discuss political issues with indigenous Norwegians. I am worried about some having very negative opinions about immigrants and refugees in my home country. True, there are many newcomers, and some Norwegians seem to think 'everyone' wants to come there just to cheat on social security, contributing little. I don't think many really want to go there, I told an anti-immigrant friend. It is just a matter of necessity, as it is for most immigrants: they leave home if they think there are better opportunities abroad, for them and their children. When Norway lost a third of its population to emigration to America in the nineteenth century that was the reason: looking for better opportunities 'over there'.

In Pakistan, I am always saddened when I see how much the UN and NGOs spend on their own upkeep, security and salaries instead of on implementation of the humanitarian and development aid they claim to bring. They should consider the moral and ethical foundation, and the hidden messages they give through the way they behave. It does not contribute positively to helping develop a democratic mindset and feeling of equality.

Recently, in America, the head teacher in a trouble inner-city school decided to introduce art and moral education for the money he transferred from costly security technology and guards. The 'difficult' students blossomed and behaved better. Some received prizes and will become assets rather than liabilities to society. We can all draw lessons from such examples, and make them locally relevant. And, ethnic Norwegians can learn from the spirituality and commitment to faith that Pakistanis have. That would hopefully lead to improved inclusion of immigrants.

Now, it being Easter, which is a spring festival and a spiritual festival, marking the need for change in our hearts, we should reflect on all big and the small issues in our lives. We should reflect on how we can become better human beings in everyday life, with the right religious and moral foundation, seeking the right media, economic, social and political actions. We should measure our achievements by how well ordinary and poor people's spiritual and everyday lives become better. Happy Easter, dear reader.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from research, diplomacy and development aid.