

Build your house on stone

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In today's article I shall reflect on the importance of having the basics right so that we can build and all-inclusive society for all. I want us to have the foundation right. We must build our house on solid ground, not on clay, and we must realize how important the superstructure is – religion, philosophy, principles and ideals. If we have that right, all other things will fall in place, and everyone will be able to live well: 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male or female...' (Galatians 3:28). Yes, because we are all one in God, and we are all the same in God's eyes. We must always work for that message, not the opposite to exclude those we don't like or don't agree with.

In recent articles, I have encouraged us all to show mercy and forgiveness, not revenge and retaliation, towards anyone who 'trespasses against us'. When I do that, I always receive many emails and other comments from my readers. Most of them agree with me, saying that with should show mercy, especially those who have reflected independently on religion, faith and moral issues. Some are liberal Muslims and Christians, while others are orthodox and conservative, and some may only be culturally religious but morally upright. Many Muslims refer to the teachings of the holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who repeatedly advises us to show mercy and forgiveness, and Christians refer to Jesus.

But I also understand, perhaps even agree with those who say that it is impossible to show forgiveness when terrible crimes have been committed. And if we are advised to love the perpetrator, a terrorist who has created mayhem, unspeakable pain and sorrow to fellow human beings, we may feel that it is impossible to forgive, or it may take long to reach that conclusion. But we will also realize that the terrorists have not only caused injury to the targeted victims, they have also caused pain to themselves, and indeed their own family and friends, who loved them, and who cannot understand why their child, relative or schoolmate went astray. They may blame themselves for what happened, and ask if there was something they could have done to avoid the tragedy.

Some few would excuse the perpetrator, perhaps as a mechanism of justification or protection of themselves and the perpetrator, or just as an excuse. And there would be some who would admire the perpetrator for courage and for following his conviction to the end, notwithstanding, though, that many may have been forced to carry out the atrocities.

I find it impossible to justify violence, indeed such carried out by terrorists. As a pacifist, I also find war wrong. I find structural violence wrong, and it is often as cruel as direct violence, but less easy to see, with perpetrators that hide their face. Most of the poverty and social injustice that we have in our midst – in the city, town and land where we live in, and globally – could have been eradicated if we had wanted to. But alas, we don't give it priority. In recent years, in spite of poverty having been cut, the number of poor has grown, with about one billion of the world's seven billion people living in outright poverty, leading to difficult and deprived lives, illnesses and early death. Children who grow up in such conditions are likely to remain in the poverty trap, too.

We must fight poverty with peaceful means, but the measures must be stern. Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of '*Satyagraha*' is such a mindset and method, a firm silent inner force seeking to eliminate

antagonism without harming the antagonists. It arms people with conviction and zest to work for betterment of one's own life and equality for all.

Dear reader, if you are from the Sub-continent, and have lived for a while, you know Gandhi's philosophy better than I do. But we seem not practice it much anymore, even draw lessons from it. Satyagraha is rarely mentioned in connection with how to reduce and solve terrorism, and how to include everyone and respect everyone in the world's diverse societies.

In order to seek inspiration and models for change, I would also like to mention the importance of the work of 'old-fashioned' labour unions and the development of the European labour parties from the 1920s onwards when the philosophy of equality and welfare for all was developed, or as communists said, we should all 'contribute according to our ability, and receive according to our need'.

Special mention should indeed be made of the proud history of the civil rights movement in America under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1950s and 1960s – and Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa, who contributed immensely to making us realize that we are all the same under God's sky, and that even those who faltered can change – as we all falter.

What I have discussed above is based on *ideas and ideals*. And it should be underlined that religions and moral standards are based on the principle that every human being is equal – in life and in death. We human beings are engaged in the everlasting struggle for greater equality and a better life for every human being; that is the real struggle between good and evil. If we could listen more to the world's great thinkers, the philosophers and prophets, the messengers of God, and other good people, we can develop societies that are better and more inclusive than what we have today. In our time, with enormous resources, knowledge and understanding of social organization, we again go astray; those who have are less willing to share with the have-nots.

Let me end my article with some Biblical references. In his teachings, Jesus brought a new message of mercy and forgiveness to the world. It was a tall order 2000 years ago, as it is today. In Matthew 5:38-42, Jesus advises that we should not retaliate in way of 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. He says that if someone asks us to escort him for a mile, walk two miles; if someone wants your shirt give him your coat as well; and, if we are slapped on one cheek, we should turn the other cheek. Jesus also says that we must not resist an evil person; most of us have good and evil in us; and the good can prevail if nurtured. In Matthew 5:43-44 Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Can we find a space in our heart to include everyone in our prayers and acts, even terrorists and others who have gone astray in moral, social, religious, economic, military and other fields? Can we build our house on solid ground, not seeking utilitarian and selfish aims, quick fixes and own gains? If we can, then we will be able to solve the evils around us – the social and economic injustice, marginalization, exclusion, gender discrimination, and so on – and we will find solutions for terrorism, too. Wise builders build their house on stone, not on clay.

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