**RELIGION AGAINST HUMANITY**

To such a degree has Religion fueled conflict, complicated politics, retarded social development and impaired human relations across the world, that one is often tempted to propose that Religion is innately an enemy of Humanity, if not indeed of itself a crime against Humanity. Certainly it cannot be denied that Religion has proved again and again a spur, a motivator, and a justification for the commission of some of the most horrifying crimes against humanity, despite its fervent affirmations of peace. Let us however steer away from hyperbolic propositions and simply settle for this moderating moral imperative: that it is time that the world adopt a position that refuses to countenance Religion as an acceptable justification for, excuse or extenuation of - crimes against humanity.

While it should be mandatory that states justify their place as members of a world community by educating their citizens on the entitlement of religion to a place within society, and the obligations of mutual acceptance and respect, it should be deemed unacceptable that the world is held to ransom for the uneducated conduct of a few, and placed in a condition of fear, apprehension, leading to a culture of appeasement. There are critical issues of human well-being and survival that deserve the undivided attention of leaders all over the world. Let us recall that it is not anti-islamists who have lately desecrated and destroyed - and with such fiendish self-righteousness - the tombs of Moslem saints in Timbuktoo, most notoriously the mausoleum of the Imam Moussa al-Khadin, declared a world heritage under the protection of UNESCO and accorded pride of place in African patrimony. The orientation – backed by declarations - of these violators leaves us with a foreboding that the invaluable library treasures of Timbuktoo may be next.

The truth, alas, is that the science fiction archetype of the mad scientist who craves to dominate the world has been replaced by the mad cleric who can only conceive of the world in his own image, proudly flaunting Bond’s Double-0-7
credentials – *Licensed to Kill*. The sooner national leaders and genuine religious leaders understand this, and admit that no nation has any lack of its own dangerous loonies, be they known as Ansar-Dine of Mali, or Terry Jones of Florida, the earlier they will turn their attention to real issues truly deserving human priority. These cited clerics and their ilk are descendants of the ancient line of iconoclasts of Islamic, christian and other religious moulds who have destroyed the antecedent spirituality and divine emblems of the African peoples over centuries. Adherents of those African religions, who remain passionately attached to their beliefs, all the way across the Atlantic – in Brazil and across other parts of Latin America – have not taken to wreaking vengeance on their presumed violators in far off lands.

These emulators are still at work on the continent, most devastatingly in Somalia, with my own nation Nigeria catching up with mind-boggling rapidity and intensity. Places of worship are primary targets, followed by institutes of education. Innocent humanity, eking out their miserable livelihood, are being blown to pieces, presumably to relieve them of their misery. Schools and school pupils are assailed in religion fueled orgies, measured, deliberate and deadly. The hands of the clock of progress and social development have been arrested, then reversed in widening swathes of the Nigerian landscape. As if the resources of the nation were not already stretched to breaking point, they must now also be diverted to anticipating the consequences – as in numerous nations around the world – that would predictably follow the cinematic obscenities of a new entrant into the ranks of religious denigrators, who turns out – irony of ironies - to have originated from the African continent.

In sensible families, while every possible effort is made to smooth the passage of children through life, children are taught to understand that life is not a seamless robe of many splendours, but prone to the possibility of being besmirched by the unexpected, and unpredictable. A solid core of confidence in one’s moral and spiritual choices is thus sufficient to withstand external assaults from sudden and hostile forces. That principle of personality development is every bit as essential as the education that inculcates respect for the belief systems and practices of others. The most intense ethical education, including severe social sanctions, has not eradicated material corruption, exploitation, child defilement and murders in society, not even deterrents
such as capital punishment. How then can anyone presume that there shall be no violations of the ideal state of religious tolerance to which we all aspire, or demand that the world stand still, cover its head in sackcloth and ashes, grovel in self-abasement or else prepare itself for earthly pestilence for failure to anticipate the occasional penetration of their self ascribed carapace of inviolability.

It is time to demand a sense of proportion, and realism. Communication advance has made it possible for both good and evil to transcend boundaries virtually at the speed of light, and for the spores of hatred to travel just as fast, and as widely as the seeds of harmony. The world should not continue to acquiesce in the brutal culture of extremism that demands the impossible - control of the conduct of millions in their individual spheres, under different laws, usages, cultures and indeed – degrees of sanity.

What gives hope is the very special capacity of man for dialogue, and that arbiter is foreclosed, or endures interminable postponements as long as one side arrogates to itself the right to respond to a pebble thrown by an infantile hand in Papua New Guinea with attempts to demolish the Rock of Gibraltar. I use the word ‘infantile’ deliberately, because these alleged insults to religion are no different from the infantile scribble we encounter in public toilets, the product of infantilism and retarded development. We have learnt to ignore, and walk away from them. They should not be answered by equally infantile responses that are however incendiary and homicidal in dimension, and largely directed against the innocent, since the originating hand is usually, in any case, beyond reach. With the remorseless march of technology, we shall all be caught in a spiral of reprisals, tailored to wound, to draw virtual blood. The other side responds with real blood and gore, also clotting up the path to rational discourse. What we are witnesses to in recent times is that such proceeding is being accorded legitimacy on the grounds of religious sensibility. It is pathetic to demand what cannot be guaranteed. It is futile to attempt to rein in technology: the solution is to use that very technology to correct noxious conceptions in the minds of the perpetrators of abuse, and educate the ignorant.

I speak as one from a nation whose normal diet of economic disparity, corruption, marginalization, ethnic and political cleavages has been further
compounded by the ascendancy of religious jingoism. It is a lamentable retrogression from the nearly forgotten state of harmonious coexistence that I lived and enjoyed as a child. One takes consolation in the fact that some of us did not wait to sound warnings until the plague of religious extremism entered our borders. Our concerns began and were articulated as a concern for others, still at remote distances. Now that the largest black habitation on the globe has joined the club of religious terror under the portentous name, Boko Haram – which means ‘The Book is Taboo’ - we can morally demand help from others, but we only find them drowning in the rhetoric and rites of anger and/or contrition. Today it is the heritage and humanity of Timbuktoo. And tomorrow? The African continent must take back Mali – not later but - right now. The cost of further delay will be incalculable, and devastating.

The spiral of reprisals now appears to have been launched, what with the recent news that a French editor has also entered the lists with a fresh album of offensive cartoons. To break that spiral, there must be dialogue of frank, mature minds. Instant, comprehensive solutions do not exist, only the arduous, painstaking path of dialogue, whose multi-textured demands are not beyond the innovative, as opposed to the emotive capacity, of cultured societies. So let that moving feast of regional dialogues – which was inaugurated by former President Khatami of Iran in these very chambers – be reinforced, emboldened, and even-handed. The destination should be a moratorium, but for this to be strong and enduring, it must be voluntary, based on a will to understanding and mental re-orientation, not on menace, self-righteous indictments and destructive emotionalism. Perhaps we may yet rescue Religion from its ultimate indictment: conscription into the ranks of provable enemies of Humanity.

**Wole Soyinka**