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Islam and We

Method and meaning; A reflection

In Nairobi, Kenya, where I grew up, a synagogue and a mosque are situated next to each other. It is a fascinating head-space of heartbreaking landscapes, Kenya is. Seven eco-systems packed into a smallish earth space.

"Diversity is us."

Our coastal segment was once ruled by the Sultan of Oman, a Muslim. Kenya's national language is Kiswahili, its codes and cadences are Islamic-tinged. The Swahili people evolved out of the meeting of cultures of the Indian Ocean. It was grounded on the Islamic moral code that governs relationships and world-views. Kenya is a secular state and your right-of-centre Republicans would feel quite at home there ideologically, if certainly not politically.

I went to a school that made introduction to the Torah, the Bible, the Koran and the Baghavad Gita a part of its religious study curriculum. In a class of thirty-six pupils, there were seventeen other nationalities in my class, including seven veiled friends. In that existence the question of difference and intolerance never arose.

Diversity was also us.

For the sake of this discussion though, I am a subjective bystander observing the resolution of various questions such as: what is likely to evolve when a dominant world paradigm—the "West"—encounters an alternative paradigm of spirit—Islam—largely in the arena of violence mitigated by the disparate energies of the twenty-first century (technology included)? To what extent is this re-encounter governed by the historical memory of the outcomes of such encounters in the past? (Think Ottoman Empire.) To what extent are social, personal, and national fears going to be acknowledged (so that posturing and hubris lose ground)? In the moment when difference becomes a threat, how is it that difference then becomes a justification for eradication?

Most importantly, what is the method that shall take the parties meeting so dynamically into the place of "seeing"—seeing in order to make a decision towards something meaningful, perhaps, dare I suggest, something that shall 'make this world a better place?'

My discussion will look at a very small facet of a massive event in the encounter of diverse cultures.

A facet to be explored opens:

The interesting thing about the clash of cultures, clash of social personalities, is that these clashes precipitate a certain ontological questioning. Is there anyone here, today, who has not been haunted by the who and why and what of their existence? Don't we each know, in some ineffable way, the "who am I now" feeling—right now before, in front of (or even behind) this Thing that we do not fully grasp?

Because...

We feel threatened.

We are dramatically called to change and we don't want to.

We are afraid.

We are afraid we shall die.

We shall die anyway.

We are afraid.

Someone once said that before a grand mystery you should remain silent. But when life suddenly breaks that silence in unexpected ways by unexpected means, what can you do? Do you remain terror-stricken and also vulnerable to all sorts of terror mongering? Or could you dare to listen to what the mystery utters, even while your knees shake? But a response is demanded and silence is the more difficult option.

Luigi Giussani, author and philosopher, notes that "All of life asks for eternity." Then, as creatures of life, we inexorably seek and practice ways of asking for this eternity.

This is as good time and place as any to explain my subjectivity regarding this topic:

My own asking for eternity, also a quest for survival, meant that at some point of my history, I became part of Islam through Sufism and incorporated the tenets of Hazrat Inayat Khan into my existence. I live in Zanzibar, an island of the Indian Ocean coast floating under the Islamic moral code. It is from Zanzibar that Christianity entered into the African interior, its passage facilitated by the Sultans who were Muslim. There is an Islamic aesthetic that feeds life, you know. Have you ever listened to the Islamic music mystics of Senegal like Mamed Kane, Youssou Ndour, Baaba Maal or the Taarab sing poetry from the East African coast, or the ecstatic performances of the Zanzibar-based Maulidi ya Homu, particularly when they gesture to that eternal existence we perhaps imagine?

But I know, even when I sway to the music, that the traders in human merchandise on the Indian Ocean who brought humans from the African interior were Muslims. There is a word for slave and infidel in the Arabian peninsula that is synonymous with an African.

I am Kenyan, so August 8, 1998 someone called Osama Bin Laden and a small army of recruits murdered two hundred Kenyans and twelve Americans in the name of his God. He did not regret the two hundred collateral infidel deaths. November 28, 2002, in Mombasa, also born of multi-culturalism, there was the bombing of an Israeli national's hotel— Osama's people, in the name of their God, killed another seventeen people, mostly Kenyans and three Israeli nationals. But I recall too the tears in the face of the Chief Imam and his resounding "Why?" Why in the name of the same God?

More questions.

Islam as an event experienced by specific segments of the world community has seared itself into the prevailing imagination through extreme and rather jarring means, laying bare values and hopes. Whose Islam is this? What is it all about? Money? Power? Control? Lifestyle? Militarism? God? Dignity? Attention?

Now on the other hand, the dominant global paradigm is that which is deemed "Western"—whatever that means. But there is a niggling question—let us suppose that it is expected that a truly evolved civilization would be most unlikely to resort to slaughter, to resort to war as a way of resolving a dispute, because war is always proposed by fear, to control a threat, real or perceived. But what is fascinating is that it has always seemed easier to "go to war" than to admit that for a moment, in a specific time and space, a person, community, nation or civilization is afraid.

I am afraid. You are afraid. We are afraid. They are afraid.

Rules of recovery: first step, admission.

But the clash has occurred, is occurring in this twenty-first century. And there are explosions in Iraq, Afghanistan. The Middle East seethes and the Western hearts are restless. There are explosions in Madrid, London, and threats of explosions everywhere else. In Paris, they even suggest that the women of Islam should unveil.

The re-encounter of civilizations has occurred and once the method of explosions end and more bodies have been burned and the stench of death is hard to shake, inevitably, eyes, perhaps weary with all the posturing, shall have to meet across tables, chairs, anything anyway. There is no choice, a meeting has occurred violently and there is no way out. Is there? Moreover, there is something compelling in a gaze, don't you find? It has a way of unveiling when it is true.

As a writer who gazes mesmerized at death, eternity and yes, evil, I study the shards of blown up human bodies, not horrified as much as—forgive me—curious if this is eternity, this way of exploding life, and why it is easier for some to imagine this as a method, as a choice to make life mean.

Drawing from an axiom offered by my ancestral Nilotic life experience, "in this thing here there must be something of me, and of you." In this there must be something of you then, and of me. And that implies responsibility, even if it is only to try to understand in order to be able to see as That-Other-Unknown-Part-Of-Me sees.

*"You've no idea how hard I've looked for a gift to bring You.
Nothing seemed right.
What's the point of bringing gold to the gold mine, or water to the Ocean.
Everything I came up with was like taking spices to the Orient.
It's no good giving my heart and my soul because you already have these.
So—I've brought you a mirror.
Look at yourself and remember me."*
Jalaluddin Rumi

Philosopher Luigi Giussani proposes a method, which he calls the Religious Sense of humanity. To engage the religious sense in the same way, humanity uses its olfactory and auditory senses. With these senses, he suggests that humanity may finally engage fully with

reality in both a rational and experiential manner and appease the ghosts of ontological questing.

In seeking the truth, could all methods embedded in human destiny be brought into use? "Truth is recognized by the beauty in which it manifests itself."

Ahh! But wait. What if the aesthetic proposed is that of a disintegrating human being? What reason can explain this beyond the cliché of insanity? You know and I know that though it is very easy to die, the decision to self-immolate and to sacrifice others in the process transcends textbook meanings. But this too must be understood, because it is of us.

*"All that is left
to us by tradition
is mere words.
It is up to us
to find out what they mean."*
ibn al-`Arabi, Tarjuman al-Ashwaq

"The theme of revelation is a constant," Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI), stated once. That which is revealed, to be revealed, requires the humility of being recognized, being seen. So we are back to gazing in order to understand, in order to "lay bare the spirit" of the thing in order to drink in the meaning It proposes.

I wish to end this brief reflection with words borrowed verbatim from the recent notes of the luminous Finnish novelist-poet, Auli Mantila.

I do not know anything about the You that is outside of myself.
You bother me and I am your object, you throw me around and
don't let me be. If I want to be even with you, I have to find out
more about you. If I do, me and You will become familiar to each
other. We will become equal and when we are familiar and equal
to each other, I will understand You. And when I understand you,
I will stop being afraid of you, I won't run away from you. When I
don't have to run away from you, I won't ever abandon you
again.....¹

She ends with the line: "Only when one knows can one be free."

Thank you.

¹ Intervention by Auli Mantila, Lahti International Writers' Reunion, 2005, Topic "Writing as an act of love."