

REITH LECTURES 2004: Climate of Fear

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Lecture 3: Rhetoric that Binds and Blinds

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I propose to address this topic from two directions - one, the political, the other the religious. However, in many parts of the world - and indeed for far too long in history - both prove to be merely the two sides of a spinning coin whose trajectory is the control of human lives, in short - Power. We only need observe the sanctimoniousness that often characterizes one - the political - and the sacrosanctity that is claimed as the foundation of the other - the religious - even when it extends its constituency to the political and mundane. A religious leader whips up his citizens in a frenzy of fear whose tenor is that their very existence - and only incidentally that of the state - is threatened. In the hysterical condition that is aroused in the populace, hundreds of youths are legally sentenced to be hanged for the crime of being 'agents of Satan', 'enemies of God' etc. On the other side, the political, wars of dubious justification are launched, humanity is savaged, the globe destabilised and the rhetoricians of power sleep soundly, until it is time for the next hysterical whip-up. The coupling within 'For God and Country' is no historic accident.

Let me at this point call attention to the fact that hysteria is not always an outwardly expressed abnormality, usually loud and violent. In fact, there is the quiet form of hysteria, as medical experts will testify. Hysteria can also manifest itself as a collective and infectious outbreak, one that cannot always be accurately traced to a logical causative event.

Many here will still remember that Leftist phase of the sixties, labelled Trotskyite or Maoist, one that is now being superseded by other radical motions towards the transformation of man, society and environment, such as ecophilia - empathy with nature as the beginning of wisdom. The sometimes rabid phase of the radical rhetoric of the Left is a phase that is now receding into obscurity, thanks mostly to the collapse of communist ideology. I happen to believe that the humanistic foundation of the socialist idea has not been thereby invalidated but, let us leave that to another discourse. The period that I wish to recall was characterized by the exploits of the Red Brigade based largely in Italy, Action Directe in France, the Bader-Meinhof in Germany etc. with clones in Latin America and Japan, in addition to one or two isolated spots in Asia. Perhaps the most sensational single event of that period was the kidnapping and murder of the former Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro. Kidnapping of businessmen or their relations for ransom was commonplace, nor can one easily forget the ruthless, cult-style executions in hidden mountain caves of Japan for crimes of alleged deviation from the pure strain of the revolutionary ideal.

Revolutionary Gladiators

The famous youth inspired 1968 uprising in Paris that attempted to resurrect a commune modelled after the Paris Commune of the French revolutionary ferment was another notable manifestation of the passion for change, a severe testing of the status

quo, and very French in temper, despite its continental affiliations. Names like Red Danny, Con-Bendt, Regis Debray, Angela Davis entered the lore of world revolutionary gladiators. Depending on which arc of the class spectrum one occupied, and the methodology of action that they advocated and deployed, the overall movement evoked among the world population extreme degrees of admiration, revulsion and - fear. How wide would the movement spread, especially among youth? How deeply would it undermine the fabric of society?

This, then, was the setting for a far less sensational but widely diffuse offshoot of the same cast of mind - the junior partners if you like - that had sprung up within the radical atmosphere of the sixties. It is the extract from this largely unfocused, non-lethal offshoot that I wish to identify as typifying the nature of rhetoric that, in various degrees of flippancy and adolescent conviction, can graduate over time into an agenda for unreflective extremism, building up to a hysterical level that turns an otherwise rational section of humanity into active instruments of, at the very least, a mandatory suspension of rationality. It is a phenomenon that reveals itself in its abandonment of scepticism. A new community is born, imbued with its own moral code - again, not one that is subjected to rigorous tests - that places itself outside existing social arrangements. A complacent society views the new tendency at first with condescending amusement, later with trepidation.

How I came to observe this process at first hand was just as relevant to my observations. I was in self-imposed exile, a therapy I had embarked upon from another situation of lethal rhetoric that had sacrificed a million or two of Nigerian humanity under the rhythmic mantra - To keep the nation one, is a task that must be done. Our Civil war being concluded in a mood of euphoria and, as I emerged from prison detention, I was not sure which form of this hysteria I found more unnerving - the tone of nationalist jingoism that surrounded me before I was locked up, one that made that war inevitable in the first place, or the barely suppressed triumphalist smugness into which I was thrust as I regained my freedom. Military success was equated with a divine vindication of the war. On the other side, the breakaway Biafran state, the same syndrome had had more tragic results. Youths went into battle with nothing but wooden guns in their hands, captives of the emotive rhetoric that was drummed daily in their heads - No power on the African continent can subdue us. That belief had somehow translated into the mimic guns with which they charged the federal foe, as reported by a colleague who was himself numbed by the experience.

Supernatural Powers

Was it any different, I wondered, from the self-submission of normally hard-headed men and women to the rhetorical powers of a Ugandan, Alice Lakwena and her Lord's Army? Alice's volunteers charged into hails of bullets, convinced that the force of bullets was neutralized from the inoculation that Alice administered. After her capture in Tanzania, a university professor who had been part of her army was asked, in an interview, how it was possible for him, a man of presumed intellect, to have been persuaded of the supernatural powers of this woman, and for so long. He could proffer no answer except that he could only imagine that they were all under some spell. Fatalities were rationalized away - such victims were only the weak in faith. This scenario has been sadly encountered in many more civil war zones all over the continent, most especially among child soldiers.

And now we come to the leftist mantra. As I began my lecture tour of some European universities during that exile, it did not take long for me to realise that the mood of the historic Paris uprising was still in ascendant, never mind the failure of that movement, and perhaps the indoctrinating zeal was all that was left. I came into daily contact with students and all manner of disenchanted youths seeking a revolutionary answer to the oppressive contradictions of their societies. Maoists, Maoist-Leninists, Trotskyites, Maoist-Leninist-Trotskyites, Stalinist-Leninist etc. - no matter what hyphenated tendencies they professed, all had one fundamental trait in common: they saw themselves as bearers of a new illumination on the condition and future of human society. They formed a compact of solidarity with the marginalized no matter how remotely placed - from the bauxite mines of Jamaica to the coal mines of South Africa. Ideologically schooled in Marxism, they gave a practical, anarchic demonstration of the cue they had elicited from Karl Marx's analysis of Law: law was not neutral, but was an instrument to protect the interests of the ruling classes. In a class struggle therefore, which was their avowed mission, indeed their duty to initiate, law itself was to be repudiated.

As for wealth, from where did wealth emanate but from the exploitation of man by man, proven by the immoral profit from the surplus labour of others. Thus their favourite slogan, based on the authority of Karl Marx declared quite simplistically that - All property is theft. That slogan was put into practice in any number of ways, from the merely self-dramatising gesture to the socially disruptive, once it was placed in tandem with Marx's interpretation of Law, which could now be taken as advocating its own overthrow through anarchic conduct.

I observed this pattern of 'direct action' at work most notably in Frankfurt University. A student who took a parked bicycle, motor-bike, or motor car that belonged to another did not consider it an act of theft. He kept it and returned it at his leisure, or simply kept it for as long as it took him to acquire a more attractive or convenient one, abandoning the former hundreds of kilometres from where its owner last saw it. Libraries bewailed their helplessness as students took away books and never returned them, often returning to exercise their right to borrow some more. Others felt that the shelves of bookstores should be open to the acquisitive mood of the reader. Students felt quite noble in raiding the accounts of parent or guardian - or indeed the neighbourhood store. All property is theft - and that, take note, included intellectual property. In short, plagiarism was no crime.

No Innocents

It was an infectious, but only mildly dangerous eruption of the rhetorical hysteria that overtook intelligent minds all over the world, one that was characterised by a uni-dimensional approach to multiple faces of reality, however varied or self-contradicting. The most dangerous of these catch-phrases however, one that was just as blithely, but vicariously tossed around by the student population at the time, has surely resurfaced in the minds of many of us in contemporary times, was: there are no innocents. Yes, we heard it even then. That sixties mood of extreme militancy, its repudiation of all 'bourgeois morality', a natural proceeding from the logic of the proclaimed self-serving interests of Law, led remorselessly to the tacit, sometime loudly trumpeted endorsement of acts of sabotage, kidnapping, and even murder. At the time, the self-willed hysteria was induced by a deliberate exercise of blinding the

mind to other considerations, screaming doubts into silence. Sometimes it was a silent scream, inaudible, but it was one that was nonetheless legible on the faces of a number in any crowd of those so-called 'conscientization' sessions, if one was not caught up within its rhetorical fervour, and took the trouble to scrutinize the faces. Those sessions were closer in temper to a Billy Graham religious revivalist rally than the models that the speakers sought to emulate, such as Fidel Castro's famous marathons.

Alas, the sermonizers of universal guilt - there are no innocents - in our time are not the student cafeteria crowd, or the Sunday afternoon rhetoricians of London's Hyde Park Corner. Unlike those students, they are not creatures of uncertainty but of holy conviction, and they have demonstrated again and again, that they consider their lives of the greatest value when they expend it - not even accidentally, but in a deliberate act - as the ultimate consummation of that conviction. They belong to a most select, near impenetrable community.

There are no innocents: This accentuation of the earlier rhetoric - all property is theft which makes us all thieves since we protect life as property, however temporarily, is what marks the difference between the rhetorical hysteria that held the world in thrall in those fervid sixties and early seventies on the one hand, and the nature of what assails us today. Merge those two shorthand rhetorical triggers and we arrive at the zone of gospeling that claims that All life is theft, and thus may be restored to its legitimate owner by any true believer, and as rapidly as possible. If only we could persuade the apostles of such gospels of the infinite virtue of modesty that resides in leaving such restoration to the personal intervention of the divine proprietor! Alas, they have constituted themselves into agents of restitution, where innocents pay sudden forfeit, without even the consolation of first seeking divine forgiveness for the lamentable lapse of being alive.

The question we must now confront is this: who or what are the principal agents of the season of rhetorical hysteria that now seeks to bind and blind the world within our climate of fear?

Passionate Evocation

We need a lot of objectivity, and a commitment to equitable dealing, in addressing this question. Fortunately - but what a costly piece of fortune! - the world has received a most exemplary piece of instruction in the devastating potential of a condition that can spread and infect a whole nation. For this, we must thank the President of one of the most powerful nations of the world, the United States. For an intense period that began over a year ago, our air-waves were bombarded with an entrapment piece of monologue of just four words - Weapons of Mass Destruction. It was a sustained demonstration, both as metaphor and as prophesy, of how empty such rhetoric can prove, yet how effectively it can blind a people, lead them into a cul-de-sac, securing nearly an entire nation within a common purpose that proves wrongly premised. Outside that nation itself, more than a few others were swept up in the hysteria that was stimulated by no more than the simple but passionate evocation of that mantra - Weapons of Mass Destruction. Predictably, it was only a matter of time before it acquired an acronym - WMD - either for ease of reference, or perhaps as a relief for that uncooperative mantra that stubbornly refused to manifest its name. WMD aspired

to the level of religious faith. Individuals who disputed its assigned reality found themselves subjected to abuse, sometimes of a violent nature. Both overtly and indirectly, unbeliever nations were either offered inducements, or threatened with sanctions.

The hysteria that was inspired by that presidential monologue was most bemusing. It reminded many of the McCarthy period of anti-communist hysteria, where the mere failure to denounce the communist ideology with satisfactory fervour, or to denounce one's colleagues for communist sympathies became an unpatriotic act that was sometimes accounted treason. Thus came into being the damning tag - Un-American activities - to ferret out and punish which, a standing committee was set up in the United States legislature. Was there any difference between that rhetorical device of the mid-fifties and that of the turn of the last century? Certainly there was continuity. As if to ensure that the nation cooption that fed on the rhetoric of 'the enemy within' did not lack for nourishment, the intervening decades between Un-American Activities and Weapons of Mass Destruction were injected with holding devices in the nature of 'Evil Empire' and latterly, 'Axis of Evil'. The beauty of the political mantra has always been its ability to distil complex events and global relationships into a rhetorical broth that precludes digestion, but guarantees satisfaction.

Let no one underestimate the monstrosity of September 11, 2001, that arrogant manifestation of the mantra - There are no innocents, nor its hideous impact on global consciousness. The tasteless gloating of some normally astute writers and intellectuals whose will to radicalism sometimes overpowers their humanism is only a measure of the pretentious detachment of some from the world we live in. It should not be permitted to cloud our natural revulsion over that event, any more than that it should inhibit us from interrogating the choices of response that could be expected from the leadership of a stricken people. More than sufficient time has elapsed for objective considerations of the choices, with all due allowance made for the fact that it was that space, not ours, that was most directly affected, most deeply traumatized, most directly, injected with the virus of fear.

There were options however, and the case is being made here that the leadership of that nation chose to substitute, for a hard assessment of its relationship with the rest of the world, an emotive rhetoric that blinded it even further, driving that nation deeper into an isolationist monologue, even within the debating chambers of the United Nations. The increasing unilateralism of the United States government since that monstrous date, most certainly the invasion of Iraq, aided by its Coalition of the Willing, has fed directly into, and widened the climate of fear. We have watched and listened in recent times to unedifying - indeed petulant - acts and pronouncements of a nation that is clearly not accustomed to being contradicted. It amounted to an act of heresy for nations not to believe in WMD, just as, once upon a time, American citizens were hounded for failing to believe that there was one communist hiding under the bed in every household. The hysterical monologue of one nation reigns supreme, demanding that the rest of the world be bound in it, and follow its direction blindfold.

Symbolic Timing

There are moments, admittedly, when the imperatives of dialogue appear to be foreclosed. Nevertheless we must never stop contrasting the dangers of monologue with the creative potential of dialogue, the latter holding out a chance of contracting, if not completely dissipating our climate of fear. Certainly it can slow down the division of the world into two irreconcilable camps, and hopefully prevent it altogether.

Fortunately, a global awareness of this perilous condition is not totally absent. Thus, a positive note on which to end, invoking the lessons in contrast between two figures who may be held to embody the two polarities - monologue and dialogue. Both figures, as it happens, are products of the same history, culture and nation state. I now invite you to accompany me to a milestone event that took place at the very end of the last century in the United Nations, with its symbolic timing for that end of the century, an event that declared, in ringing terms, that it was time to eschew the sterile monologues of the past and cultivate a new spirit of dialogue, the only prescription that the world knows for the hysterical affliction of the rhetorical.

It was within the United Nations that the yet ongoing project titled Dialogue of Civilisations, was launched by President Khatami of Iran, in association with UNESCO, a project that has already begun to sprout several national and regional offshoots. I was present at its elaborate inauguration in the UN headquarters in New York, attended by several heads of states, other world leaders, intellectuals, ministers of religions etc. On that occasion, President Khatami delivered a most enlightened speech, one that, I am certain, took his audience by surprise. On the minds of most of that audience, including mine, was unquestionably the fact that we were listening to the leader of that very nation whose late spiritual leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, not quite a decade earlier, had inaugurated an era of global fear by a unilateral appropriation of judicial rights over any citizen of our world, as he sentenced the writer, Salman Rushdie, to death for an alleged offence against his religion. A major religion, deservedly classified as one of the world religions but, just the same, only one of the structures of transcendental intimations, or superstitions, known as religion.

The consequences of that moment are still very much with us. With a frequency, frenzy and a confidence in immunity that did not exist before the Salman Rushdie affair, a Friday sermon in a mosque over a real or imagined religious slight or has led to mayhem in normally harmonious communities, stretching from Kaduna and Plateau states in Nigeria to hitherto obscured Indonesian islands. Some may consider this timing a coincidence; if so, it is a coincidence that some of us did anticipate and openly predict in international gatherings. A dismal instance, within my own country Nigeria, was that of the governor of a largely Moslem state, Zamfara, who pronounced a killing fatwa on a young journalist. Her crime, a comment that the Prophet Mohammed did not lack an eye for beauty in womanhood. Such religious arrogation would never have been dared within our secular nation before the emboldening example of the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Incitement to Murder

The Ayatollah's moment of a global incitement to murder remains a poisoned watershed in the relationship between and within nations. It has contributed to a large

extent to the very condition of global intolerance, bigotry and sectarian violence, to whose dismantling an elected Iranian leader now openly committed himself and, most symbolically, in the halls of the United Nations. That past was, unquestionably, one of the gathering moments of the violent winds that have swept the world into the zone of fear that becomes more heated by the day.

Khatami's challenge to the world has been taken up in various places - in Georgia of the former Soviet Union, under the same rubric of Dialogue of Civilisations, sometimes Dialogue of Religious Faiths, another in Macedonia, while there was a follow-up within Iran itself. I participated in another in Abuja, Nigeria in December last year, the scene of a religion instigated massacre that stunned the world in its mindlessness and ferocity, one whose spurious provocation was the staging of the Miss World contest, and its alleged female immodesty.

Within the cult of Political Correctness, itself an immobilizing form of hysteria, this constitutes, I know, a delicate, near untouchable subject. I do not share such a sentiment. There is nothing in the least delicate about the slaughter of innocents. One of my all-time favourite lines of poetry comes from the black American poet, Langston Hughes. It reads, simply: There is no lavender word for lynch. Now that is one line I would not mind converting to the service of rhetorical hysteria.

We encounter a reluctance to question why, today more than ever, as I remarked in an earlier lecture, adherents of some religions, more than others, turn the pages of their scriptures into a divine breath that fans the random homicidal spore to all corners of the world. Political correctness forbids the question but, for the rest of us who prefer politically incorrect truthfulness to politically correct incineration or other forms of complicity in our premature demise, this question continues to exercise our minds: just what is it that turns the mantra of a beatific chant of faith in one religion, more than the next, into summons to an orgy of death? Why did Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* arouse violent reactions, condemnations and incitement to boycotts, as has recently Mel Gibson's *The Passion of The Christ*, but not a universal outcry for the murder of the cineastes, or of those who participated in these interpretative exercises?

The fault is not in Religion, but in the fanatic of every religion. Fanaticism remains the greatest carrier of the spores of fear and, the rhetoric of religion, with the hysteria it so readily generates, is fast becoming the readiest killing device of contemporary times. Even after half a century, films that touch upon the era of Nazi glorification, with their orchestrated chant of *Sieg Heil*, continue to send a chill of apprehension down the spines of all with a historical memory. Scenes of mass religious frenzy increasingly resurrect these nightmares, and if President Khatami's inspired Dialogue of Civilisations leads, eventually, to a dissociation of the chant of millions to the greatness of God, from the gross ultra nationalist politics lodged in the chant of *Sieg Heil*, we would have lifted one corner, a not inconsiderable one, off the shrouds of fear that now envelop life, and humanity.