

REITH LECTURES 2004: Climate of Fear

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Lecture 5: I am Right; You are Dead

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The French nation was lately involved in a controversy over its decision to ban ostentatious symbols of religious faiths from secondary schools. I was invited to take part in that debate, and readily accepted. It was a chance to openly interrogate a long-held conviction that there should be a period in the development of the young mind when the perception of differences in humanity is reduced to an absolute minimum, even if it cannot be eliminated completely. That period, it seems obvious, is that of school pupilage, where the space of instruction is cleansed of manifestations of private wealth, tastes, class etc. The symbol, as well as practical expression of this oneness, the leveller, is of course the school uniform.

Objections surfaced to the mind - the indelicate, even provocative timing - indelicate to the extent of almost sounding like a declaration of hostilities! Then the positive role of such symbols as spiritual and ethical reminders in the consciousness of youthful minds at all times, a corrective mechanism when on the verge of misconduct. In short, my mind was readying itself for the mode of dialogue, anticipating even the extension into as protest demonstrations. Capitulation by the government was already a possibility. I anticipated a protracted dialogue, involving the basic philosophy of education, going back to ancient times, inductions into age groups in traditional societies etc etc.

For some alas, such dialogue was superfluous. A hitherto unknown group, vying to overtake others as the Terminal Censors of our time, warned the French government that it was next in line for a Madrid-style reprisal and should prepare for a season of 'sorrow and remorse' for her perceived assault on the Islamic faith. So now, perhaps it is only a matter of time before some public target, perhaps even a school is bombed in an effort to end the dialogue, the contested head scarves torn off to serve as tourniquet for severed limbs or even - shrouds.

Crusade of Vengeance

Here is an even more ancient terminating venture - the ironically named 'Right to Life' crusaders in the United States, known plainly as anti-abortion militants. One such group - self-styled the 'Army of God' boasts a supportive network for its assassins, one that extend to Europe. They gun down doctors, police guards, and the occasional patients or passers-by. The network provided protection for the one who named himself "Sword of God" while on the run for murders. Another of the same breed of Christian fundamentalist, an ordained priest, was executed in Texas last year, to a chorus of threats by his support group that they would unleash on the American nation reprisals that would make Timothy McVeigh's crusade of vengeance look like child's play. Timothy MacVeigh, for the uninitiated, was that remarkable zealot who was plagued by a unique social conscience that could only be stilled by blowing up a

public building, one that housed both a state security department as well as an infant school. McVeigh did not profess any religion. Nonetheless he was a zealot of his own Supreme Purpose, the manifestation of a private irredentism. His chosen grounds of dispute were neither ideological nor theological, but he presents us with a clear psychopathology of the zealot, one who is imbued with a self-righteousness that can only be assuaged by homicidal resolution. It moves all possible discourse away from even the dogmatic, dead-end monologue of *I am right, you are wrong* to that of *I am right; you are dead*.

The issue therefore, as I remarked in my last lecture, is not Religion but fanaticism. This however does not absolve either Ideology or Religion of responsibility for the fanatic strain to which it gives birth, one that Religion even occasionally unleashes in the contest for political supremacy, then repudiates - too late. It is time for us to recognize that there is no regulating mechanism for the fanatic mind, once set in motion. Not for nothing do the Yoruba warn that: *sooner than have a monster child meet a shameful death in the market place, it is best that the mother strangle it in the secret recesses of the home*. What this means, quite simply, is that the primary burden of exorcising the demon that escaped from the womb, rests on the same womb that gave it birth. Today there is urgent need for mother religion of whatever inclination to come to the rescue of humanity with a creative act of infanticide.

It was not theocratic dictatorship, but repressions of a secular order that evoked my sense of unease when, a full generation ago, I delivered a lecture of the title *Climates of Art*, to which I made reference at the introduction of these series. There is however a link, unsought, a sense of brutal continuity. That link was the attempted murder of the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, a Nobel Prize winner by the way, but what matters to us is that he was - still is - a writer of his time and most relevantly, place. Unlike a number of other creative minds trapped within the killing domain of religious terminal censors, Mahfouz did survive, a living symbol of that space of creative martyrdom that stretches today from Afghanistan of the Talibans through Iran, to North Africa, Algeria most especially. That space of fanaticism aggressively expands into other nations of traditional tolerance and balance, including mine, Nigeria.

The Plunging Knife

My poem *Samarkand* was a tribute to Naguib Mafouz, who was fated to expand into the religious those apprehensions of the secular to which I had given voice in *Climates of Art*, delivered some twenty five years ago:

*..... the ink of Kandahar
Has turned to blood. The heir of ancient dynasties
Of letters - Khorassan, Alexandria, Timbuktoo lies sprawled
In the dirt and dust of a passageway*

*He is no alien. No roots than his grow deeper
In that market place, no eye roved closer home.
He is that fixture in the marketplace café
Sipping sweetened cups of mint, oblivious of
The bitter one that would be served*

*By the shadowy one, the waiter-stalker, a youth
Fed on dreams of sarabands of houris
Doe-eyed virgins, wine and sweetmeats in the afterlife
But to his paradise, a key - the plunging knife.*

The nineteenth century black American scholar, W.E.B. Dubois once declared that the issue of the twentieth century would be that of race. It is becoming clear that while that century may have indeed inherited and been plagued near continuously by that social issue, it was replaced towards the end by that of religion, and it is one that has not yet been addressed with the same global concern as race once was. Perhaps the Katami-UNESCO initiative to which I referred in an earlier lecture, a series of contacts titled *Dialogue of Civilisations* will succeed in bringing the world to confront this lethal successor to the secular monologue. Pol Pot is dead, gone the way of those other architects of the necropolis - Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin and other mixed company of both Left and Right. Today, the main source of fanatic mind is - religion, and its temper, one that, ironically, is grounded in the doctrine of submission, has grown increasingly arrogant, doctrinaire and violent, almost in an unconscious vengeful recompense for its apprenticeship within the spiritual principle of Submission.

At stake is tolerance, and the place of dissent within a social order. There are, however, differences between the workings of secular intolerance and those of the theocratic and such differences may assist us in assessing the very real threat to human freedom that the closed world of the fanatic poses to humanity. Secular ideology derives its theories from history and the material world. The mind has therefore learnt to pause occasionally and reflect on the process that links the material world to the doctrines that derive from or govern it, to test theories against those realities, be they economic, industrial or even environmental. The dynamic totality of the real world is given rational space. Even the craving after infallibility - as in the case of Marxism - may result in the exposure of fallacies and inconsistencies, or at the least, ambiguous zones within the theory.

Thus, within a secular dispensation, even under the most rigid totalitarian order, its underpinning ideology - that is, is equivalent of theology - remains open to contestation. Open questioning may be suppressed, open debate may be restricted or prohibited by the state or the Party of power, but the functioning of the mind, its capacity for critique - even self-criticism - never ceases. The mind remains a free agent within its own space, free to roam outside the confines of the totalitarian order, to seek, and often find kindred spirits and form a conspiracy of non-believers or at least, sceptics. This factor leads sooner or later to an alternative view, and perhaps piecemeal erosion of the doctrinaire system. Under the theocratic sibling however, one that derives its authority, not from theories that are elicited from the material conditions of society but from the secret spaces of Revelation, this disposition of the mind towards alternative concepts is next to impossible. Curiosity succumbs to fear, often masquerading as pious Submission. The theocratic order derives its mandate from the unknown. Only a chosen few are privileged to have penetrated the workings of the mind of the Unknown, whose constitution - known as the Scriptures - they and they alone can interpret. The fanatic that is born of this dogmatic structure of the ineffable religion is the most dangerous being on earth.

Homicidal *hubris* is the ultimate hallmark of the fanatic. The ice pick in the neck of Leon Trotsky, ensconced in the deceptive safety of Mexico, was forged in the same furnace as the knife that sought the throat of Naguib Mafouz.

Act of Impiety

We are sometimes able to observe the intrusion of political opportunism into the workings of religious zealotry, a common enough marriage of convenience that gives birth to monstrosities. Let us only recall the sustained mob arousal in India that ended with Hindus razing down an ancient mosque in the state of Uttar Pradesh, on the grounds that this centuries-old mosque had been built on the very spot where Lord Rama, a Hindu deity, first made his appearance on earth. The reverberations of that act of impiety have continued to haunt the Indian nation till today, but the immediate repercussions were orgies of killings, including the ambush of railway trains and commuter buses, the virtual 'religious cleansing' of neighbourhoods, creating ghost villages and derelict urban centres.

And here, let us pause, and use this episode to anticipate and silence those who, whenever an outrage linked to one religion or the other attracts amply deserved condemnation, immediately sound alarms of prejudice, sectarian hatred and world conspiracies, tacitly claiming for such structures of faith an immunity from comment. The world, East and West, including its official organs - UNO and UNESCO - were unambiguous in their condemnation of that crime, even as they would later unite in condemnation of the iconoclasm of the Taliban against the historic statues of Buddha. That former rebuke did not lead to any claims by Hindus that the world nursed a primordial hatred against Hinduism or had entered into a conspiracy to eradicate that religion from the world. On a personal level, I found myself sufficiently exercised to note the event in my poetic menu of *Twelve Canticles for the Zealot*, published in 'Samarkand and Other Markets I have known':

*A god is nowhere born, yet everywhere
But Rama's sect rejects that fine distinction -
The designated spot is sanctified, not for piety but
For dissolution of yours from mine, politics of hate
And forced exchange - peace for a moment's rapture.
They turn a mosque to rubble, stone by stone,
Condemned usurper of Lord Rama's vanished spot
Of dreamt epiphany. Now a cairn of stones
Usurps a dream of peace - can they dream peace
In iconoclast Uttar Pradesh?*

Few spots in the world today are exempt from the depredations of the fanatic. I believe it should be possible to view the bombing of innocents in the United States, Bali, Casablanca, Madrid or anywhere else in the same way. It is untenable to claim that, because those mass-killers implicated, and persist in invoking the banner of Islam, seeking legitimation and a killing rapture from that religion, that Islam is therefore under indictment. Equally is it unacceptable to claim that any condemnation of the act or pursuit of the criminals reveals hatred of the religion. A world in which a powerful organisation like NATO goes to battle against the christian Serbs on behalf of a battered moslem population, and brings the head of their violators to justice

before an International Tribunal, is not a world that is prejudiced against Islam, Christendom or Buddhism and the propagators of such doctrines are merely disingenuous.

Cesspool of Fanaticism

In any case, the Christian world is not one, neither is the Islamic, nor do their combined authority speak to or for the entire world, but the world of the fanatic is one and it cuts across all religions and vocations. The tributaries that feed the cesspool of fanaticism may ooze from sources separated by history, clime and race, by injustices and numerous privations, but they arrive at the same destination - the zone of unquestioning certitude. The zealot is one that creates a Supreme Being, or Purpose in his or her own image, then executes out the orders of that solipsistic device that commands from within, in lofty alienation from, and utter contempt of society and community.

We, on the African continent, whose people were decimated, in a time of our own troubled peace, in Kenya and Tanzania, our soil violated by one of the earliest aerial sabotage that scattered human limbs over the earth of Niger, have a special stake in this. The black freedom fighters of Southern Sudan, locked in a brutal war of over three decades against an Islamic regime, a genocidal war that has claimed at least a hundred thousand times more lives and overseen a thousand times greater destruction of a people, an environment and a culture than in the Middle East, have not resorted to accusing the Islamic or Arab world of a conspiracy against the black race. They are focused on their quest for liberation from a specified, localised theocratic and often racist order, against which they have raised charges of genocide that remain largely ignored by the Western world and by the United Nations. We do not hear from the leaders of that struggle any proposition of the division of the world into the African world against All Others. They have not moved to set the bazaars and monuments of Medina on fire or burn Japanese infants in their cribs. Not even the historic - still ongoing in parts - denigration of African religions and cultures, or indeed the memory of both European and Arab enslavement of the African peoples, has elicited this inflammatory agenda.

African religions do not proselytize but, let me break that tradition, in the cause of the global quest for harmonized co-existence, and offer the world a lesson from African spirituality, taken specifically from the world of the *orisa*, the pantheon of the Yoruba people. This religion, one that is still pursued in Brazil and other parts of Southern America and the Caribbean, has never engaged on any equivalent of the crusade or the jihad in its own cause. The word 'infidel' or unbeliever is anathema to its Scriptures, thus it cannot recognize a spiritual dichotomy of the world. Despite its reticence however, it has penetrated the globe and survived through confident retention by the displaced and dispossessed slaves and its infectious hold even on their European violators. Its watchword is - tolerance, a belief that there are many paths to truth and godhead and that the world need not be set on fire to prove the supremacy of a belief or the righteousness of a cause.

Them and Us

The dead-end dogmatism of *I am right, you are wrong*, has circled back since the contest of ideologies and once again attained its apotheosis of *I am right; you are dead*. The monologue of unilateralism constantly aspires to the mantle of The Chosen and of course, further dichotomises the world, inviting us, on pain of consequences, to choose between 'them' and 'us'. We must, in other words, reject the pronouncements of a George Bush in the ultimatum: '*you are either with us and against the terrorists, or you are on the side of the terrorists*', just as strongly as we repudiate Osama bin Laden's '*The world is now clearly divided into two - the world of the followers of Islam against that of infidels and unbelievers*'.

Could the United States have responded differently immediately after Sept. 11? Perhaps not. Hindsight is a most unreliable judge of such decisions, and those circumstances were clearly unprecedented. Did that nation however have to embark on that avoidable path that led remorselessly into Iraq? More specifically, and with no complication of hindsight: why were the Weapons inspectors of the United Nations ordered out of Iraq in submission to the will of one nation especially at a moment when Saddam Hussein had openly submitted himself to the authority of that very institution?

Let us turn to our present dateline. It is still the second millennium, the so-called era of the 'global village'. Concretely, it is the era in which the world has attempted to put in place, after many blunders and dereliction of responsibilities, International Courts and Tribunals for Crimes against Humanity. It is an era in which former Heads of State are being hauled up for crimes against their own peoples and against others - from Chile to Rwanda. It is the era of the strategy of near globally upheld sanctions, not always successful, we know, and sometimes excruciating slow in the ability to produce the desired results. It is nevertheless the era of newly reinvigorated possibilities, a new global relevance for the organ called the United Nations. Indeed, perhaps it was stemming from this same consciousness, an attempt to impress upon the world the critical necessity of such an organ in the New Millennium, that the Nobel establishment in its centennial anniversary chose to honour that organisation, and its Secretary-General, with the Peace prize. We cannot deny or gloss over some of its failures to live up to the world's expectations, to its founding ideas, and the needs of humanity. We are only too keenly aware of the costly consequences - in global trust, and in human lives - of some of those failures. Nevertheless, we are doomed to despair if we failed also to acknowledge its many achievements, and to accept the fact that it is the only organ in the world that has unquestioned authority of intervention in troubled spots.

Unilateral action, or the appropriation of a global duty of response, by any one nation, serves only to diminish the United Nations. That the greatest culprit in this respect should be one of such powerful achievements as the United States, one that is also host to that organisation, physically, on its own soil, only denotes an enervation of global vision. That the United States has the capacity for technological, military and economic leadership is not in dispute; what the United States lacks is philosophical leadership, despite its formidable reserves of original thinkers. The atrocity of Sept. 11 was a crime against the world, against humanity. It was thus a moment for the United States to have demonstrated her readiness to reinforce the structures that take a global view of such criminality. The US had the option of placing her formidable

capabilities under the moral authority of the United Nations, instilling in her own people the imperatives of a global approach to justice.

Quagmire of Iraq

AMERICAN STRIKES BACK! - No, this resort to what we identified in an earlier talk as rhetorical hysteria was not what the world needed to see emblazoning the screens of American television hour after hour, day after day and week after week as the United States gathered its strength to avenge a crime that was committed on its soil. Such orchestration of mood was bound to lead, sooner or later to the quagmire of Iraq, lose its ethical moorings in the original cause, and degenerate into an open-ended career of aggressive pursuit that would translate as AMERICA STRIKES ON - AND ON AND... ON... AND ON...its lethal array of weaponry poised to *awe and shock!*

If certain acts against humanity appear to place their perpetrators beyond dialogue, we must still embrace interrogation - that is, self-interrogation. In what way, in turn, have we contributed to the making of such a moment? Failure to do this limits the long-term effectiveness of response, and brackets us with the mentality of the fanatic who, literally, never seeks to recover, indeed is incapable of recovering a long receded moment of doubt, the zone of possible choices, of the potentials of the routes not taken. That quest is open and universal. What nature of an environment ensured the stabbing of a Naguib Mafouz? Has Marxism triumphed since the killing of Leon Trotsky? Was peaceful co-existence promoted by the demolition of the mosque in Utter Pradesh? Has the assassination of Sheikh Yassin made the world any safer. What kind of morality is it that turns a 14-year-old child into a walking bomb. Does a supposed wall of defence concretize hope or despair across the Middle East? Why did the woman writer, Taslim Nazreen, become a fugitive from her home in Pakistan?

Our theme is fanaticism - so let the last word be on behalf of that doubly endangered specie, writer and woman, standing in for the disdained of the world, seeking equality for their kind:

*Some words are coarse, obscene, indecent.
They make a case for censorship, such words as
Pagan, heathen, infidel, unbeliever, kafiri etc.
The cleric swears he'll sweep the streets clean
Of the unclean, armed with Book and Beard. Both
Turn kindling, but overturn the law of physics.
For the fire consumes all but the arsonist. He lives
To preach another day. The promised beast
Of the Apocalypse left me unbeliever
Till a rambling cleric apportioned death on CNN -
Surely that devil's instrument! - on Taslim Nazreen
She wrote of an equalising God, androgynous
Who deals, ambidextrous, with the Left and Right.*