

Making Room

As the new year unfurls its first leaves, an isolated village is worrying about its future. It enjoys neither democracy nor clear leadership; its residents shift uneasily between alliances and enmities. Brawls and domestic strife are common, along with occasional, more serious disagreements that threaten to involve the whole community. Until now, somehow, the inhabitants have always managed to struggle on. However, recent world events have brought unprecedented upheaval; it is possible that the whole village will polarise into factions and fight until there are too few survivors left to maintain life; or perhaps the wealthier villagers will seize complete control and implement some oppressive rule of force in order to survive.

There is no regional or national governor to take control. The village stands alone.

We are familiar with the idea of the 'global village', but, in truth, we are not a village. We are the whole and only human world. We very clearly need to construct some framework or shared concept that will allow all of us to build together on a secure agreement instead of trying to cope with the consequences of perpetual disagreement. When are we going to get around to setting our respective houses in order and talking to each other about a common future?

We worry about the idea of cloned or genetically modified humans – we worry about commerce-driven society, the proliferation of arms, the drug trade, the political self-interests that swallow up workable policies; in short, we fear the dehumanisation of society by complicated or enormous processes that we cannot understand or control. 11 September 2001 was our wake-up call. It does not take genetic modification or incomprehensible forces to manipulate the humanity out of a human being. It can be achieved very simply by rigidly enforcing certain ideas and life-experiences which deny the humanitarian precepts of tolerance, pluralism, justice and self-determination. It can be done with pain and slogans.

Our choice is, therefore, simple and stark. We can move further away from each other in mutual distrust and an attitude of 'every man for himself'. Or, we can move closer together in mutual understanding and appreciation in order to create greater security and greater opportunity for everybody. We can fight pain by providing help and justice, and slogans by the real exchange of ideas.

2001 ended with an act of insanity and inhumanity. Today, we witness the Middle East on the brink of catastrophe, and the paradox of two key nations with enormous potential for peace threatening each other with the most devastating weapons of mass destruction. It is sad that we have collectively and singularly failed to develop a civilised framework for disagreement. It is time to correct that failing.

What are the elements of the human code of conduct? We need to draw up a blueprint for a new way of thinking – a recognition and acknowledgement of reality that reflects our collective human conscience according to our separate historical experiences as nations, as civilisations, as communities, and as individuals.

A human being in a weak, conflict-ridden region in Africa wants the stability and cultural security that will allow him or her to work towards achievement and success for self, family and friends. The human being in an affluent and strong American community wants the same stability and cultural security for the same reasons. The human being in the interim Afghan government is no different. With such fundamental and universal needs in common, we are actually in a position to build a global culture that has at its heart the idea of supporting and promoting basic human rights. One of the first steps is to establish a global ‘culture of compliance’ with regard to human rights declarations. Expressing the principle of equality, for example, means less than nothing if it does not mean introducing legislation and education which are consistently and continuously put into practice in order that equality may actually exist.

Yet even universal implementation of human rights agreements is only a necessary condition for global citizenship. It is not sufficient by itself. Global citizenship cannot be built without global values; and global values demand that each person take the responsibility to uphold those values. Another step forwards would be to ensure that ideas of ‘achievement and success’ for the comparatively powerful few do not entail continuing frustration and failure for the less powerful majority. Yet another step would be to cultivate a general expectation that we should all enjoy pluralism and freedom of communication – not only *between* cultures and traditions but also, just as importantly, *within* them.

Our common ground is presently threatened by extremists on all sides who will, if given the chance, fill it with ideologies of hatred and terror in the pursuit of each other’s annihilation. To the extent that we permit our isolation from each other, we permit the spread of a general desolation that is very far from humanity. I therefore call upon each individual, organisation and government that desires a chance for the future to speak out against such ideologies and take action to reverse the downward

spiral of irrational fears and hatreds. That spiral leads down to an economics and politics of despair which, as recent events have made clear, today threatens us all. Yet, all together, the people of the world now possess the power to dispel the horrors of injustice, sickness and hunger. It remains for them to show that they possess the will to look and to act. Ignorance, apathy and cynicism are as necessary to the machinery of oppression as violence and fear.

International values do exist. The moderate majority wants peace and would allow others to enjoy peace too. Yet, paradoxically, we may not be moderate in demanding the preconditions for peace; we must be passionate, loud, vigorous, dedicated, persistent and, ultimately, unstoppable. We must abandon all cultural relativism, all nostalgia for unworkable systems, and put the welfare of the human being squarely at the centre of all our works. For if not, we risk losing the middle ground; and without that shared global patrimony, there will be no room in which to build a viable future for any of us or our children.

So our questions for the New Year are: will the heads of the national households react adequately and responsibly to events? Will the businessmen and businesswomen of the world look to their interests in global stability and development, and start to invest in their long-term future as well as their short-term gain? Will the population and government officials of Afghanistan work for their whole country, and for all of their compatriots? Will the EU be willing and able to play an active role in international politics? Will the great powers abandon isolationist approaches and think in terms of creating stronger friendships based on universal human values? Will the world media compose their scripts according to international values as well as to institutional codes of conduct? Will the individual educators, politicians, journalists, parents, soldiers, traders, policemen, religious representatives, academics, service-providers and all the other human beings of this world begin to act positively within their spheres of influence to promote a global culture of diversity, peace, exchange, and respect for the other?

In 2002, we need to elevate the consciousness of who we are and of our diverse relationships with each other and the universe. The Qur'an repeatedly calls us to observe "the perpetual change of winds", "the alternation of day and night", the "variety of human colours and tongues", "the alternation of days of success and reverse among peoples" – to reflect on our part in a completeness of creation that is beautiful for its diversity.

As a Muslim I believe that God does not order people to do evil things. I believe that good is inherent in each one of us. At the centre of all

movements and philosophies there is balance. The central ethical command in Islam is to rule according to justice and fairness not only in principle but also in the actions of each day. In our hearts, we know that neither 'religion', nor 'ambition', nor 'money' is the root of all human ills. They are powerful forces for good or for evil according to the nature of our actions and intentions. The perversions of such forces – extremist belief, the craze for power, abject poverty begging from gluttony – these are the enemies that drive out peace. But religion for humanity – ambition for humanity – money for humanity – these are the redemptive agents of peace.

Therefore, our challenge for 2002 is not to make religious culture weaker – or somehow to neutralise economics or ambition or other forces for change. Our challenge is to educate all the human users of these tools in their proper humanitarian use.

Let us enhance similarities whilst cherishing differences; and let us change our behaviour toward that goal, so that 2002 may herald the age of sanity and wisdom. Let this be the year in which more than six billion lives began to participate in a shared understanding of the need to return to humanitarian, legal and moral norms. Let us all work to adopt and promote a mindset which views the eradication of poverty, racism, terrorism, inequality, hatred and intolerance as an inescapable moral imperative for each one of us. This means not just conversation but interactive conversation; it requires altruism rather than patronage, participation as opposed to survival, and contribution instead of passivity. We have to give future generations some constructive hope that it is possible to build not merely a new world order but a new world attitude.

We all need some sort of security in this harsh beautiful life. Instead of allowing discord and jealousy to flourish, let us unite against the tyrannies of despair and poverty that threaten our most basic securities: the security to be ourselves whilst engaging confidently with each other's many cultures; and the security to live with dignity, in freedom from fear and hunger.

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