

Bizarre new world

By Pervez Hoodbhoy,
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After Tuesday's terror attacks, Samuel Huntington's evil desire for a clash between civilizations may well come true. The crack that divided Muslims everywhere from the rest of the world is no longer a crack. It is a gulf that, if not bridged, will surely destroy both sides.

For much of the world, it was the indescribable savagery of seeing jet-loads of innocent human beings piloted into buildings filled with other innocent human beings. It was the sheer horror of watching people jump from the 80th floor of the collapsing World Trade Centre rather than be consumed by the inferno inside. Many Muslims also saw it exactly this way, and felt the searing agony no less sharply. The heads of states of Muslim countries – except Saddam Hussein – condemned the attacks. Leaders of Muslim communities in the US, Canada, Britain, Europe, and Australia have made impassioned denunciations and pleaded for the need to distinguish between ordinary Muslims and extremists.

But the pretence that reality goes no further must be abandoned. One would like to dismiss televised images showing Palestinian expressions of joy as unrepresentative, reflective only of the crass political immaturity of a handful. But this may be wishful thinking. Pakistan Television, operating under strict control of the government, is attempting to portray a nation united in condemnation of the attack. The truth lies elsewhere, as I learn from students at my university here in Islamabad, from conversations with people in the streets, and from the Urdu press. A friend tells me that crowds gathered around public TV sets at Islamabad airport had cheered as the WTC came crashing down. It makes one feel sick from inside.

A bizarre new world awaits us, where old rules of social and political behavior have broken down and new ones are yet to be defined. Catapulted into a situation of darkness and horror by the extraordinary force of events, we need a response that is moral, and not based upon considerations of power and practicality. It must begin with a clearly defined moral supposition – the fundamental equality of all human beings.

Before all else, Black Tuesday's mass murder must be condemned in the harshest possible terms without qualification or condition, without seeking causes or reasons that may even remotely be used to justify it, and without regard for the national identity of the victims or the perpetrators. The demented, suicidal fury of the attackers led to heinous acts of indiscriminate and wholesale murder that have changed the world for the worse. A moral position must begin with unequivocal condemnation, the absence of which could eliminate even the language by which people can communicate.

Analysis comes second, but it is just as essential. No "terrorist" gene is known to exist or is likely to be found. Therefore, presumably born normal, the attackers and their supporters were afflicted by something that caused their metamorphosis from human beings capable of gentleness and affection into desperate, maddened, fiends with nothing but murder in their hearts and minds.

What was it?

Tragically, CNN and the US media have so far made little attempt to understand this affliction. The cost, if this omission is to persist, cannot be anything but terrible. What we have seen is probably the first of similar tragedies that may come to define the 21st century as the century of terror. There is much claptrap about “fighting terrorism”; billions are likely to be poured into surveillance, fortifications, and emergency plans, not to mention the ridiculous idea of missile defence systems.

But, as a handful of suicide bombers armed with no more than knives and box-cutters have shown with such devastating effectiveness, all this means precisely nothing. Modern nations are far too vulnerable to be protected – a suitcase nuclear device could flatten not just a building or two, but all of Manhattan. Simple logic says that the chances of survival are best if one goes to the roots of terror.

Only a fool can believe that the services of a suicidal terrorist can be purchased, or that they can be bred at will anywhere. Instead, their breeding grounds are in refugee camps and in other rubbish dumps of humanity, abandoned by civilization and left to rot. A global superpower, indifferent to their plight, and manifestly on the side of their tormentors, has bred boundless hatred for its policies.

In supreme arrogance, indifferent to world opinion, the US openly sanctions the daily dispossession and torture of the Palestinians by Israeli occupation forces. The deafening silence over the massacres in Qana, Sabra, and Shatila refugee camps, and the video-gamed slaughter by the Pentagon of 70,000 people in Iraq, has brought out the worst that humans are capable of. In the words of Robert Fisk, “those who claim to represent a crushed, humiliated population struck back with the wickedness and awesome cruelty of a doomed people”.

It is stupid and cruel to derive satisfaction from such revenge, or from the indisputable fact that Osama and his kind are the blowback of the CIA’s misadventures in Afghanistan. Instead, the real question is: where do we, the inhabitants of this planet, go from here? What is the lesson to be learnt from the still smouldering ruins of the World Trade Centre?

If the lesson is that America needs to assert its military might, then the future will be as grim as can be. Indeed, Secretary Colin Powell has promised “more than a single reprisal raid”. But against whom? And to what end? No one doubts that it is ridiculously easy for the US to unleash carnage. But the bodies of a few thousand dead Afghans will not bring peace, or reduce by one bit the chances of a still worse terrorist attack.

This is not an argument for inaction: if they can be found, Osama and his gang, as well as others, must be brought to justice. But indiscriminate slaughter can do nothing except add fuel to existing hatreds. Today, the US is the victim. But the carpet-bombing of Afghanistan will squander the huge swell of sympathy in its favour the world over. It will create nothing but revulsion, and promote never-ending tit-for-tat killings.

Ultimately, the security of the United States lies in its re-engaging with the people of the world, especially with those that it has grievously harmed. As a great country, possessing an admirable constitution that protects the life and liberty of its citizens, it must extend its definition of humanity to cover all peoples of the world. It must respect international treaties such as those on greenhouse gases and biological weapons, stop trying to force a new Cold War by pushing through NMD, pay its UN dues, and cease the aggrandizement of wealth in the name of globalization.

But it is not only the US that needs to learn new modes of behaviour. There are important lessons for Muslims too, particularly those living in the US, Canada, and Europe. Last year I heard the arch-conservative head of Pakistan's Jamat-i-Islami, Qazi Husain Ahmad, begin his lecture before an American audience in Washington with high praise for a "pluralist society where I can wear the clothes I like, pray at a mosque, and preach my religion". Certainly, such freedoms do not exist for religious minorities in Pakistan, or in most Muslim countries. One hopes that the misplaced anger against innocent Muslims dissipates soon and such freedoms are not curtailed significantly. Nevertheless, there is a serious question as to whether this pluralism can persist forever, and if it does not, where the responsibility will lie.

The problem is that immigrant Muslim communities have, by and large, chosen isolation over integration. In the long run this is a fundamentally unhealthy situation because it creates suspicion and friction, and makes living together ever so much harder. It also raises serious ethical questions about drawing upon the resources of a society for which one has hostile feelings.

This is not an argument for doing away with one's Muslim identity. But, without closer interaction with the mainstream, pluralism will be threatened. Above all, survival of the community depends upon strongly emphasizing the difference between extremists and ordinary Muslims, and on purging from within "jihadist" elements committed to violence. Any member of the Muslim community who thinks that ordinary people in the US are fair game because of bad US government policies has no business being there.

To echo George W Bush, "let there be no mistake". But the mistake will be to let the heart rule the head in the aftermath of utter horror, to bomb a helpless Afghan people into an even earlier period of the Stone Age, or to take similar thoughtless action. Instead, in deference to a billion years of patient evolution, we need to hand over charge to the cerebellum. Otherwise the survival of our species is far from guaranteed.

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