

The Dream That Failed

BY Jamal Khwaja

The political and emotional climate in which the human family lives and breathes has changed a lot after the sudden collapse of the twin towers in New York in September, 2001. The US government condemned the terrorist attack as blatant aggression on the soil of a sovereign state and took it as a challenge to the greatest military power today on the planet. If the solitary Super-Power was not safe from the reach of terrorism entire humanity stood in the gravest peril, so they said. Indeed, the government and the American people, as a whole, did find themselves engulfed by a deep sense of humiliation and of insecurity.

The giant brought the matter before the bar of the UN. This was, indeed, the proper course, but soon afterwards the reference to the august world body changed, first, into an imperious demand and, then, into a threat. The giant named the President of Iraq as the culprit and the super villain of the ongoing drama of world terrorism and ordered, as it were, the entire free world to teach an instant lesson to a reborn Hitler. Even as the world body was still deliberating on the complex issue the giant flexed its awesome muscles and its still more awesome death machine came to a roaring and blinding start. The stated war aim was the defence of the American people, indeed, the defence of liberty for entire humanity, and the liberation of the oppressed millions of Iraq and the entire region.

Assuming the giant was sincere, can any impartial observer of the human scene seriously doubt that the giant's motive was 90%, atavistic rage and revenge, 9% the effective safeguarding of oil interests, and only 1%, the liberation of the oppressed millions of the regions concerned? In all humility, I submit that the rage was caused by the trauma of the collapse of the twin towers, though the concern for protecting oil interests was and remains quite understandable. The concern for oil, however, was overshadowed by the giant's bewilderment in the face of a strange terrorist ethos that exalts suicide as supreme victory and Divine reward.

Its analytical and rational capabilities benumbed by an unsuspected and powerful challenge from an insignificant quarter, the Super Power regressed, as it were, to a tragic response. The tragedy was that the principal architect, financier and director of the UN turned into a peeved cynical mocker of the system as such. It was as if the Godmother and midwife of the UN, in a fit of rage at not being able to convince the UN strangulated its own baby. Did not this amount to turning back the clock of humanity's progress on the tortuous journey to the ideal of peaceful settlement, through dialogue, of all international disputes? There was, however, one redeeming feature-as President Bush and Prime Minister Blair were engaged in giving bad reasons in public to seduce wiser heads to their way of thinking, at that very moment, millions of ordinary citizens of the Western world were staging marches and rallies in their capitals to defend the legacy of Locke, Voltaire, Goethe, Jefferson, Lincoln and Mill. May this happen whenever and wherever the need may arise in any part of the world.

Dissident opinion in the UN was, by no means, hostile to the Bush-Blair line. The European Powers, Russia, China and India merely wished that the US should not precipitate any retaliatory vengeance against Iraq or others without solid proof of complicity in the attack on the twin towers or possession of WMD, and without the full involvement of the UN. This was all the more necessary and desirable because the Iraqi imbroglio was itself a cumulative byproduct of American Realpolitik in West Asia after the end of world war n, specially its dubious role in inciting Iraq against Iran.

The spectacular American victory over the Taliban forces in Afghanistan where, a few years earlier the Soviet Union had met its Waterloo, had perhaps, turned the healthy American confidence and pride in its military and technological supremacy into hubris. The Taliban and other religious fundamentalists were also in a state of rather irrational euphoria due to their remarkable military triumph over the 'enemies of God'.

Sociologically speaking, the cause of the remarkable success of the '*Mujahideen*' was three-fold-poor morale of the Soviet fighters and establishment, the power of the '*jehadi*' ideology, and the power of American arms and money. However, the Muslim world gave primacy to the second factor, while the Western world, in general, to the third. The '*jehadi*' Muslims went on to argue that if the enemies of Allah could be humbled in Afghanistan, so could they be in Palestine and other places. Indeed, Osama bin Laden, former friend and protégé of the US turned into a foe and vowed to turn the tables against the West. The American establishment, on the other hand, felt it was well within their power and, indeed, their sacred mission to make the entire human family fall in line and beg for development aid from the Super Power. Their success in the first round in Afghanistan whetted their appetite but they could not get hold of Laden.

The underlying assumption behind US foreign policy has been the belief that fear and greed of the ruling class, rather than ideals, is the fuel that runs the motor of international relations. Consequently, US, in common with other powers, has followed the old stick and carrot approach in international relations, rather than the sociological and ethical approach as the best minds and noblest hearts of the world, both Western and Eastern, recommend. In effect, this means that US policy makers have seldom bothered to go to the roots of international conflicts or the social economic determinants of religious fundamentalism. The leadership of the backward and deprived segments of the human family, also does not go to the roots of conflict and takes to religious fundamentalism as a means of escape from harsh reality and as a tool of attack upon the perceived 'enemies of God'. If the secular technocrats are certain of triumph without any need of Divine blessings, the religious fundamentalists are equally certain that Divine retribution will overtake and defeat all evil. I submit, both are clinging to illusions.

The crucial point here is that even if we accept (for the sake of argument) that the religious line of thought is true, it is not true in the sense in which religious fundamentalists take it as true. Allah's help will not come unless Muslims first rightly understand the right import of Allah's commands and guidance and then also act accordingly. In practical terms this means that Muslims will succeed only when they have a correct road map of the territory concerned and they actually travel or move accordingly rather than just beat the drum that theirs is the 'best map in the world. It is here that religious fundamentalism comes crashing to the ground. I have no doubt that any religion or faith that divides the human family into 'we and they', believers and nonbelievers, the

saved and the damned does not provide us with the right or correct road map, no matter how brave and sincere the leaders and followers of the religion concerned.

To sum up, neither the power of the gun, nor the power of money, nor the power of ideological illusion (religious or secular) can help humanity without right knowledge followed by right action. And this implies a critical and balanced understanding of the human situation in the light of natural and social sciences and also true insight into the human psyche in its full depth.

History teaches us that the course of the human story is never straight and unilinear, but full of twists and turns as a result of which good comes out of evil and evil out of good. History is replete with such reverse eddies of good and evil within a broad mainstream of events leading to the preservation and accretion of good in the broad sense. The ongoing stream of history, however, follows some psychological and social laws just as natural phenomena follow some inbuilt sequences or observed inter-connections. Careful analysis of history shows that these twists and turns happen because human agents can never be sure that their voluntary actions will have the exact intended consequences without any admixture of unintended results. Many a time quite unintended consequences enter into the ongoing stream of events. And the unintended consequences are so potent that they even undo or negate (partly or wholly) the intended goal or objective of the agent or agents. This is the phenomenon of 'reverse result through recoil'. When this happens an evil action turns into a 'catalytic agent' for producing some good that the agent had not envisioned at all.

This reverse effect happens in sufficiently large numbers to suggest the hypothesis that there is some inbuilt tendency in the web of ongoing events to check evil and promote good. This belief or 'faith' that the nexus of history, broadly speaking, produces and promotes good fortifies the human quest for value, though this does not constitute any evidence for 'hard' Theism, or the belief that history is written by the 'Hand of God'. However, we can say that 'hard' history does not preclude or contradict a 'soft' faith that the movement of history preserves and promotes the good.

Let me give just two instances in recent times of reverse effects through recoil. Hitler brazenly violated human dignity, universal morality and international norms through his atrocities on millions of innocent human beings. Great Britain and France challenged the dictator. Hitler won battle after battle but Churchill won the war after active intervention of US and the untold sacrifice and bravery of the Russian people. The Allies achieved their war aim, but some unintended consequences also followed. The economies of Britain and France were crippled and they became dependent upon American aid. Moreover, the Indian freedom movement got a tremendous boost and the US itself became a strong champion of the immediate transfer of power by Britain. The UK wisely and gracefully bowed out.

Assuming that Indian freedom was a good cause why did the cause fail thrice in 1921, 1930 and 1942, but succeeded only in 1947. The failures and the success reveal the complex nature of social causation and the crucial role of unintended consequences of human actions. The evils committed by Hitler shamed and provoked Britain to overcome its inertia and come out bravely to defend the right. This was very much intended by Britain and France, but it was certainly not their intention to cripple their own economies and become almost totally dependent upon American aid. Yet, this is, precisely, what happened. Assuming that this was not a good thing to happen, this consequence radically altered the imperial attitude and capability of the British lion. In short the economic dependence of imperial Britain (inarguably evil) paved the way for Indian independence (inarguably good). And Indian independence soon afterwards paved the way for the, by and large, peaceful and negotiated liberation of several Asian and African peoples. It is very reasonable to maintain that even without the Hitler phenomenon freedom would have come to the subjugated peoples due to the inbuilt cultural push or value elan of the movement of history. But, I submit, the 'liberation phenomenon' of Asian and African countries would not have come in the 1940s and 1960s if the 'Hitler phenomenon' had not come in the 1930s.

The second example I have in mind is the course and result of the Vietnam war in the mid seventies of the 20th century. The US government perceived it as a just war against the evil of Communism. As the war dragged on and on and the ground realities on the American side (many of which were ethically indefensible and evil) surfaced to the consciousness of the American people, despite an official conspiracy of silence or of distortion, the American youth and also the common man rebelled against the hypocrisy and double standards of their leaders. The power of American public opinion gradually paved the way for the retreat of the American Goliath from the land of the (Communist) David, as it were. This turn of events opened a new chapter in the history of the Black peoples in America and the rest of the world through giving a terrific boost to the movement for Human Rights in America and in the rest of the world. Another quarter of a century was needed for ending the Apartheid in South Africa and the final emergence of a humanist democratic setup in the land where almost a century ago Gandhiji had launched his experiments in truth and social justice. Through initiating the Africa Fund and creating international pressure that the UN should enforce sanctions against racist regimes India played a notable role in the ultimate triumph of good over evil.

We, thus, see how different evils in different contexts and times in the fullness of time and after prolonged struggle and suffering, advances and retreats, smiles of fortune and avalanches of misfortune create conditions that favour the emergence of good. Likewise, good cannot avoid creating elements of evil in the continuous flow of the stream of history just as impurities or harmful elements contained in the soil pollute the pure contents of pristine glaciers as they enter the flat surface below. However, brave and noble hearts and minds take up anew the fresh challenges in a never-ending quest for value. And the struggle goes on. Each one of us can choose his or her side.

Having clarified or having tried to clarify my basic approach to the human situation today I would like to make some concrete comments on what has gone wrong with the basic US approach to foreign policy. Their policy has been guided by the belief, first, that fear and greed are the most powerful motivators of human action, and second, that leadership means dominance over others. This, perhaps, unconscious model of leadership has created the anomaly that the super-rich super power gives aid to other nations so liberally, but hardly wins any sincere appreciation or respect in return. This was certainly not the case in the 19th century when 'a nation of shop keepers' had emerged as the world custodian of political morality and the mentor of democracy. In short, Pax Britannica inspired the world; Pax Americana frightens it.

The entire world feels over-awed by the economic and military power of the solitary giant. Its style of foreign policy is based on the idea that leadership means dominance, and world dominance means the power to hire and fire the 'managers' of the different countries of the world. Western countries often remind India and Pakistan of the very high price they have been paying on account of their unresolved tensions and conflicts. Will the American giant examine its own political conscience over the issue of its style of leadership and its recourse to double standards in international relations, specially Israel's defiance of the UN over the past years and now the US government's tragic scuttling of the UN ship under its own captaincy?

Foreign policy apart, US remains the land of freedom and opportunity in an open society. Individuals and organizations vigorously promote the good, as they see it—separation of church and state, inter-faith understanding, ultra-right orthodoxies, ban on abortion, gender equality, plural sexual orientations, social justice, environmental protection, heritage preservation, free enterprise and what not.

Outgoing and friendly to all, the common man is busy enjoying his or her affluence, leisure and opportunities for both growth and entertainment. What is, perhaps, most significant for persons like myself is the air of tolerance and the spirit of live and let live in society. Enlightened circles have turned to the idea that religion or faith is a matter of existential choice, not reasoning. Diana Eck, Bernard Lewis, Chomsky, Karen Armstrong, Annemarie

Schimmel, the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Pope John Paul, Gandhiji and last, but not least, Abul Kalam Azad, all, in their own way, have taught modern man that different organized religions are different roads to a basically common destination. The fundamentalist religious approach, on the other hand, holds that religion is a total code of conduct and only one code ought to prevail.

The US was the first and the foremost leader of spiritual pluralism and the separation of church and state. The founding fathers of the American constitution were as good; perhaps, better Christians than the vast majority of those who opposed the principled separation of church and state. This is the great lesson that Muslims have yet to appropriate inwardly as Muslims. At present the very idea of separating the church and state creates in numerous Muslims feelings of guilt that this amounts to deserting their faith or becoming indifferent to faith.

The present confrontation between American *Realpolitik* and the '*jehadi*' version of Islam has produced a blinding haze that has made it difficult for both Muslims and others to see matters in the clear light of reason and the evidence of history. It is a fact that, barring the approximately 80 year period of the Crusades in the medieval era, Christians, Muslims and Jews in West Asia and Africa lived together fairly amicably for a thousand years as 'people of the Book' under Muslim hegemony. Their quarrels began, generally speaking, with the advent of the modern age, which ushered in the ideas of secular democracy, nationalism, sovereignty and human rights along with technology and industrialization in the Western world. The Zionist movement and the eventual birth of Israel in 1948 led to the blood and tears of innumerable innocent victims of alternate Arab and Jewish revenge terrorism.

To the above tragedies have now been added the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. The religious fundamentalists honestly think that this is a battle between the party of God and the party of the Devil. But the fight is not between good and evil as such but rather between different ideas of what is good and what is bad. Human ideas about God or about good or bad come into conflict because different individuals and groups occupy different positions and are at different stages of growth and development and therefore, have different viewpoints and material interests. The battle of ideas is, therefore, not a battle between good people and bad people but between good people who have different ideas of what good is. And the right way of discovering the truth is not murder or suicide but dialogue.

Western scholars who genuinely stress the need for intellectual honesty and empathy in the field of comparative cultural studies are steadily paving the way for fruitful inter-cultural and inter-faith dialogue on a global scale. Unfortunately, Muslim scholars are still in the grip of religious apologetics as the Christian missionaries once were in the 19th century. The vast majority of Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and others today more or less accept that different religions are different paths to God, but Muslims are very resistant to the idea of religious pluralism. I submit, Islam can be no exception to the principles of tolerance, equal human rights, inner freedom and ceaseless inner growth. This approach to Islam must, however, rise from the depths of the Muslim psyche; it must not be an imposition or imitation due to fear or material gain. No religion today can survive unless it genuinely accommodates spiritual pluralism and humanist democracy implying the corollary of the separation of religion and state.

Is the above view of the nature and purpose of religion too intellectual or philosophical for popular acceptance? Well, the simple fact is that sages and saints of all religions have preached and practised universal love and compassion rather than fear and hatred of the other. To my mind, the basic approach of the saints and sages will, eventually, overcome the approach of religious fanatics or power seekers. The present political, economic, and social pressures will eventually give way to the deeper wisdom of the spirit. The road to this happy consummation, however, will be long and bumpy and also require a sound road map.

Who will supply the road map? Well, not the Capitol Hill or the corridors of power in Westminster. The most appropriate place was the UNESCO, but the tragic blunder of the US government in the Iraq matter seems to have ruined this possibility. However, it is still my hope and trust that the great centers of learning and research in the US and Europe will engage themselves in impartial free and critical study of all religions and cultures of the human family. May each one of us cultivate the ability to hear, in the silence of the spirit, one's innermost whisper of his or her soul and find peace and salvation in one's freely chosen way.