



Back to Horse Sense ... God Willing!

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April 2007

To the readers of these meditations I must apologize. Some who know Nancy's and my e-mail address (scudder@spidernet.com.cy) have written to ask whether they've missed something. They haven't. For the last few months I have been deliberately 'taking a break' if for no other reason than to reassess what these meditations are all about.

First of all, I've no intention to duplicate (far less *regurgitate*) the excellent work others are doing in portraying the realities of the Middle East's political morass. Along with many others, my friends Douglas Dicks, Marlin Vis, John Kleinheksel and Jim Zoghby (each in his own way) are on top of the stories — and 'story' is what it's all about. They have a remarkable grip on what is happening. My voice in these matters would be one of far lesser worth and competence, and I don't wish to transgress or intrude.

Reframing the mission of these meditations, therefore, is important. What I want to do is suggest questions ... not so much propose answers. Given my training, it's unavoidable that I will occasionally slip into my 'preacher mode'. But there are altogether too many questions out there that must be posed. *That*, I think, I can help with, and the current events in the Middle East (this *Morgenland*) will inevitably provide a great deal of the background. The *foreground*, though, I hope will be different.

And so ... back to the task!

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Recently I read a description of what 'science' is. That is: What do we do with our minds when we *honestly seek to know*? I'll paraphrase it: First, authority is there to be questioned and challenged, not adored. Second, theory and experiment work hand-in-glove — the abstract idea is only a jumping off point; it's got to be tested. And third, science happens in a community of peers whose job it is to examine what you do critically and call you to account when you've screwed up. The goal of science is not to establish timeless truth. It is there to stop frail humans from falling into plausible-sounding falsehoods. It is there to help us defend against any story that sounds good simply because it fits our biases.

That sounds a lot like what I would call simple 'horse sense'. Every now and then it's good to be reminded *why* you have a mind. And, God knows, we have to find some 'horse sense' in these days! The momentum of stupidity — neutralized mind — seems hell-bent on driving us into a broken world of conflicting pieces, each gobbling up and wasting a whole lot more of our spiritual and ecological resources than we can afford to squander. Our leaders become more adolescent by the day, and the amazing thing is that

we elect and *re-elect* them to public office. We definitely need to find some ‘horse sense’ somewhere and we need to find it quickly!

Beyond the issues of global warming, the new slavery of human trafficking, world poverty, racial bigotry (aka, Katrina and New Orleans), sustainable development, AIDS and the curable infectious diseases of the poor, the mindless lottery of the world’s stock markets, nuclear proliferation, the ‘war on terror’ and its multiplying mirror images ... in the face of these devastating problems, we first and urgently need to find ‘horse sense’, and we need it where it counts.

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I write from my microcosm in the Middle East, and that defines a good deal of my perspective. And, here, the controlling element is, of course, the Muslim community. So I’ll pose it as a test case in the search for ‘horse sense’.

The first piece of horse sense in understanding the Muslim people is to cast aside the drivel so-called ‘authorities’ or ‘specialists’ are dishing out — even *Muslim* ones. We need to become skeptics and iconoclasts. As I’ve noted in the past, too many bits of disinformation and downright lies are now in circulation whose purpose is purely to infect world culture with a xenophobia that, in time, may make it all too easy to contemplate full-scale global violence.

But, hey! Muslim DNA is compatible with that of all other human beings — we can actually all crossbreed! We’re not talking about a different species here. Muslims are *actually people*, and they have the same simple aspirations we all do. We all want to see our lives, the lives of our children and the lives of our neighbors blessed with a measure of security and prosperity — that is: life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Does that sound familiar?

So that’s the first piece of horse sense: Toss off the garbage of the so-called ‘specialists’ with their deadly abstractions and ruthless jargon. Let’s see each other as human beings in three dimensions. That’s not only good ethics; it’s good ‘science’. And my suspicion is that the correlation goes much further.

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Here’s the second piece of horse sense: We need to tease apart the degree to which our religious perceptions are culturally conditioned. We must test our faith against the sort of human society we actually want to see emerge and against all the other possibilities. And that’s not easily done. We’ve got to work at it.

We’ve allowed our sense of shared humanity to be corrupted — our awareness of the marvelous wealth and variety of the human pilgrimage worldwide. Our commercial media and government propagandists have had a field day portraying Islam (a third of the world’s population) as the boogeyman. Instance after instance is being brought forward to terrorize and convince us that, broadly speaking, Islam intends to subvert Christianity

and modern civilization. Iran and its Islamic revolution is coming up with a nuclear bomb; al-Qâ'idah wants to bring down western democracy; Hamas is intent upon destroying Israel; Hizb-Allâh is doing God knows what, but it ain't good; Muslims by-and-large don't drink much alcohol, they don't like scantily clad women in advertising, a lot of them dress funny, they're against usury, and they don't eat pork, and that's just not good for business; and Syria is just ... untrustworthy ... we're not exactly sure why, but there you are. And the new cliché is 'Islamophobia' — we're just petrified by Islam. What option is there but to react violently to violence threatened?

But let me propose the following: St. Paul suggests that we see "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2nd Corinthians 4:6). So may it not be equally true that we see in Christ's face also the light of the knowledge of the glory of humanity? Isn't that what Christians mean by the Incarnation? The two meet in One.

Leave the Incarnation aside, even though the memorial of its climactic moment, Easter, is upon us. The crucial question is what do we do with the notion of *humanity itself*? It is up to us not only to propose its glory but also to *test* it. The proposition and its test are interactive — theory and experiment repeated honestly time and again. More importantly, they both belong to our horse sense. 'The proof of the pudding is in the eating,' as it were. And if you look around you, 'folk is folk'. If we believe in the innate glory of humanity ('created in the image of God') and in the God-given dignity of each individual, we need to have the courage of our convictions, and act upon them in our assessment of Islam and especially in our relations with Muslims.

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And that takes us into the critical third component of horse sense. In the end, the courage of our convictions lies in our willingness to come into open dialogue with those who, like us, have the courage of *their* convictions. We need to risk encounter with our Muslim neighbors and hazard breaking the stereotypes (both theirs and ours). We need to accept as a gift their critical words that help us return to our roots and sort through the mare's nest of our past for those things that are of true value and jettison the rest. Historically, they've done this in the past; they can do so again. And the obverse is also true: Christians have ministered to Muslims for a long, long time.

In a word, we need to recover horse sense and begin work on rebuilding a world that's better than the confrontational, clashing one we're now heading into. We need to call falsehood by its true name, and we need to tell each other true stories, not just stories we'd like to hear and that make us feel comfortable. We need to save each other — frail as we are — from falsehoods that cost untold suffering and grief.

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In the months ahead I hope to work at this task, God giving me strength and wisdom. I invite you to respond and make these meditations a dialogue.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.