



God Mend Thine Every Flaw

Lewis R. Scudder, Jr.
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That day, the 4th of July, has come and gone but I began this writing before. We had three British guests and did a cookout — a dip in the pool, burgers on the grill, potato salad and a monster watermelon for desert. We hung out our Wal-Mart-bought American flag that we do once a year. We did the whole nine yards bar the fireworks (this is brushfire season in Cyprus). How patriotic can you get? And Nancy and I also did some serious soul searching.

I keep remembering that the rockets' red glare and the bombs in mid-air were those of America's enemy. We were the underdog in the War of 1812, holding onto something precious by the skin of our teeth. And there come to mind all the national hymns my Aunt Gertrude Pennings taught me, especially 'O Beautiful, for Spacious Skies'. I keep humming it in my mind, especially the verse that runs, "O beautiful for heroes proved / In liberating strife, / Who more than self their country loved, / And mercy more than life! / America! America! / God mend thine every flaw; / Confirm thy soul in self-control, / Thy liberty in law." And ... I choke up. *That* America has almost vanished on the world stage. It persists as a thing for nostalgia ... a thing of the past ... a reality in some people I know who have true integrity as American patriots ... but over here ... it is gone.

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If memory serves, America was the first experiment in founding a world culture where "... *all men* are created equal, and endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights ... life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And that experiment generated a tidal shift in world history. Whether the fathers of the American Revolution had it all worked out or not, the ideas they launched took flight, came to belong to the world and continued to evolve. Radical innovations emerged such as the Bill of Rights, universal suffrage, the legal end to both slavery and segregation, equal opportunity, Wilson's notion of the right to self-determination for all peoples, equal standing before the law, the separation of powers ... get the list started and it's hard to know where to stop. We see these things today as cultural givens. We simply assume them. But in their day they were radical departures from the norm. And it was the American Revolution that set the ball rolling and rolling worldwide and it still hasn't stopped rolling.

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I got kicked off on this line of thinking by the latest in the series of articles I've been translating for *Al-Tasamoh Journal* published in Oman. The Syrian scholar, 'Alî As'ad Watfah, writes on the topic 'Humanity and the Ideal of Citizenship'. And it is quite a magnificent piece that, again, posed some serious challenges for a translator to interpret honestly, clearly and correctly.

Wafah begins his essay with a blistering broadside against terrorism and religious extremism in all their guises and incarnations. His point, as a Muslim, is that liberal notions of tolerance should not cushion insanity especially in matters religious where too quickly things spin out of control in bigotry, violence and death. Tolerance is actually a virtue of universal culture. It stretches the individual to realize that the 'other' is a human being, equal and deserving of respect, even if he or she looks and behaves differently to one's own norms. How this stretches to embrace the fanatic who is certainly 'different' is not clear. Perhaps the Christian notion of the sin against the Holy Spirit can be brought into play. It is one's own choice to reject the embrace of grace. One simply becomes un-embraceable.

What Wafah wants to talk about, however, is positive. His first thesis is that terrorism cannot be met by counter-terrorism. Violence is not the constructive response to violence. Education is. As many sage commentators remarked early in the Iraq debacle, you begin by assuring people of security and the basic infrastructure of modern life (electricity, clean water, sewage systems that work, fuel, safe streets, education for the kids and medical help for those who need it) and then you move on from there. Get the social and economic motor ticking over and people back on their feet with a sense of their day-to-day purpose, progress and dignity. These things are not violently achieved but, when they are achieved, there also emerges an overwhelming desire for peace and the creative drive of human beings is unleashed. Violence becomes the aberration that it is and cannot find purchase. That was not provided for in Iraq and the fact that it wasn't is really quite amazing, because the initiative was in the hands of the one nation on earth that should have understood these things best.

Wafah's point is that the Arab world (and by implication the world at large) must take the initiative and move beyond narrow nationalism and long-entrenched social bigotries toward a sense of global citizenship. The contest against insanity is educational and cultural. It is kids, young adults and older folk who must come to appreciate that we're in a new age where the survival of the human race is pegged to principles of tolerance and the affirmation that difference is a good thing ... an *enriching* thing. Indeed, democracy *depends upon* diversity, and the citizen is only a citizen if he or she participates in the give-and-take of the larger political process. Then you have a functioning democratic culture.

What I appreciated in Wafah's analysis was that the political process has to do with the citizen's taking up cudgels in defense of his or her own freedom and self-expression and that of the neighbor 'other' as well. But beyond that he advocates a very secular global sense of identity. It is an identity that is pegged to fundamental principles of a citizen's freedom, and his or her involvement in social causes, justice and peace. It is certainly not pegged to sectarian ambitions. I find that insight quite remarkable but not at all surprising.

The Al-Qâ'idah thesis has been put forward. It proposes a frontal attack upon all forces that oppose its version of Muslim hegemony. But the world, including the Muslim world, is a long way from knuckling under. So the cultural challenge Wafah proposes is a very serious one and cannot be confined to traditional Muslim countries. We've all got

to get involved. This is a global age and it can proceed peacefully and fruitfully only when we are aware of our world citizenship.

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Is this all a bit like re-inventing the wheel? It may seem so, but we've got a situation that's a lot more complex than the founding fathers of the American republic ever dreamed they'd have to face. The demographics alone are stunning. We are in an age of global migration and that alone is mind-boggling. People are on the move as never before and when they've gotten to where they've moved to they require attention. Most of the attention they're getting is repressive, exploitative and not infrequently tragic. But America is still the great proving ground for diversity and pluralism. It can still show itself to be the home of the working model (flaws and all) of world citizenship.

On this July 4th we Americans are, to say the least, challenged. We are challenged by our foundational documents. Our having lived for over 200 years with a republican and democratic heritage challenges us. We must hark back to the origins of our rather unique role as the model for contemporary world culture (in its better guise), and what 'Alî Watfah is saying is that we must perform ... we Americans and we citizens of a world culture. It is now long past time to pray that God will mend our every flaw and confirm our soul in self-control, our liberty in law. But it is a good prayer to refresh.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

A Concluding Note:

Many people throughout the world will rejoice in the news that Alan Johnston has been liberated. On March 12th he was abducted in Gaza by a family of thugs who dressed themselves up piously as 'The Army of Islam', but nobody was fooled. On Easter morning I was assigned to offer the prayers of intercession in our church, and Alan was much on my mind. This was my prayer for Alan: "We pray for Alan Johnston, that gifted BBC journalist, who remains in the hands of those whom he has loved and on whose behalf he has ruthlessly spoken the truth but who, in foolishness or for whatever reason, have now shown their dark side, violating a sacred human trust. May love and truth soon be vindicated by Alan's release. This is Easter, after all, and we reaffirm life for all, and we believe in miracles." Well, it took 114 days, but finally that miracle has happened. Alan may now celebrate his own 4th of July, a day of liberty for him and, through him, for many especially in the Palestinian community. I rather rejoice in this globalization of the 4th of July. One of Alan's comments after being freed was, "This is the best 4th of July ever." Indeed, Alan, it was good.