



What's the 'Emperor' Wearing?

Lewis R. Scudder, Jr.
Apaisia Village, Cyprus
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Our friend, Ann Staal, the Reformed Church in America's anchorperson for 'Middle East Peace-Makers', has taken the bit between her teeth and pressed us on our use language and its consequences. Serendipitously perhaps, she also called to my mind the old fable related by Hans Christian Anderson about 'The Emperor's New Clothes'. (We could only wish that it were more fabulous than real.)

That fable, remember, recounts how a gullible emperor bought the 'sting operation' of a couple of sleazy and fast-talking tailors. Weaving their language web about him, the two shysters convinced the old fool that they could execute for him a fabulous royal costume that would astound the universe. When, after due flummery, they declared the product finished, there was a royal procession of the emperor in his new clothes. Crowds cheered wildly and proclaimed the inimitable glory of his new apparel. Propaganda ... language bending ... had worked. It was only a clear-sighted child, in the simplest of terms, who said, "But the Emperor has nothing on!" And suddenly the crowd fell silent around the buck-naked monarch in mid-strut.

The fable, as fable, ends happily with some forethoughtful attendant throwing a cloak over the potentate, the incarceration of the so-called tailors and their due punishment. (The child got off scot-free, it seems.) But, as we know, that particular denouement doesn't always follow. The 'child' is often imprisoned for preaching sedition, and the shysters remain in office as the 'tailors to the empire'.

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After September 11th, 2001, we Americans launched the 'War on Terror'. (Whoever thought up that cliché should be shot! I will suspend my opposition to capital punishment in this *one* instance.) Many New Yorkers and thinking people throughout the country cringed at what the post-9/11 histrionics of our administration portended. And the military-industrial 'tailors', having won the word game through sound-bite flummery and crude media complicity, set to work weaving the stuff of our worst fears, proclaiming it glorious — Afghanistan, Iraq and now Lebanon — all woven of the bizarre and quite invisible fibers of neologisms that have, in the end, only turned our minds to mud. Heavens! Explain to me how else Donald Rumsfeld, Condolezza Rice, and Dick Cheney could possibly have survived in office without George W. Bush strutting about in the buff while the whole neo-con rhythm section and the Armageddon 'Christian' Zionist chorus proclaim the beauty of his vestments.

In the upshot, America has ventured forth upon the 21st century's first major spasm of global violence. It has wielded the whip hand in stimulating the most ferociously resonating system of criminality the world has ever seen. And the little child still says, "But the Emperor has nothing on!"

And that is the point to which Ann Staal has called our attention: Language! How do we use it?

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She starts by saying: "I propose ... that we stop using the terms 'Terrorist', 'Terrorism', 'Radical Islam' and, the latest buzzword, 'Islamofascism'. Instead let us just call the people who perpetuate such acts 'criminals' ... 'criminals' who use terror tactics behind a facade of (twisted) Islam." (Ann Staal in an email circulated August 15, 2006, to 'RCA Middle East Peace-Makers'.) What she's pleading for is a return to sanity in what we say, and what will crucially affect what we actually *do*.

Muslims particularly in Britain (where the issue is now reaching something of a climax) have long argued this point. In his latest of many landmark books, the highly respected British theologian and irenic bridge-builder between Christians and Muslim neighbors, Bishop Kenneth Cragg, wrote with uncharacteristic pique:

Truly horrendous and catastrophic as the attack on the World Trade Center was, ... it was wrong to proclaim forthwith a 'war on terrorism'. The phrase adopted misread the situation. To speak of 'terrorism' is to concede that we can be 'terrorized'. To announce 'war' in answer is to take the adversary on his own showing — and to his advantage. ... It would have been saner to summon goodwill anywhere to a 'World Order against Criminal Conspiracy'. That would have been naming the deed for what it was and with a descriptive that ... succeeded in gaining recognition — by the other party — of its depraved intent. ... There was, to be sure, much talk of 'bringing them to justice', but that is done more aptly by a powered jurisprudence than by armed belligerence. (Kenneth Cragg, *The Qur'an and the West* [Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005], pp. 6 & 7.)

Cragg then quotes John Quincy Adams in a speech delivered on July 4th, 1821, ...

... America's heart ... goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. Once embroiled in foreign wars of interest and intrigue, the fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force. She might become the dictatress of the world: she would no longer be the ruler of her own spirit. ...

... and goes on to observe: "In those terms — as President Adams saw them — 'of her own spirit', response to September 11, 2001, would have meant, not, 'anti-terrorist war', but 'anti-criminal action' on two fronts, the one political and the other spiritual, a common venture in crime-policing and an effort after human sanity which took up the promise as well as the menace of religion." (Cragg: same reference as above)

The acts of September 11th and those that have succeeded it in Bali, Madrid, London, Bombay and daily in Baghdad, Gaza, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and many other places are simply criminal and, against the verbal 'stitchery' of the 'tailors', must be dealt with in those terms.

Because they are pointed and apt, I'd like to use Ann's words here: If we change our use of language, she says,

1. *It will demote the 'Terrorists'*. Instead of granting them the dignity of a 'cause' (Radical Islam) or an 'ideology' (*Islamofascism*), they become simply dime-a-dozen criminals and murderers. Maybe that will also make their methods less attractive to new recruits?
2. *It will help us guard against inappropriate over-reaction*. Persons using and seeking to use terror tactics (World Trade Center attackers or Hezbollah kidnappers, for instance) may be hunted using the best law enforcement methods available and arrested on whatever charges can stick (tax evasion, visa infractions, whatever, if need be) as would any other Mafioso, drug-cartel [agent] or gang [member]. Invading other countries would not be a necessary response.
3. *It would help us stop thinking in terms of a clash of civilizations*. If this is seen not as the 'Christian West' vs 'Islam', but as a battle against serious crime, then it will be far, far easier for Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, agnostics or whomever to see themselves as working together on the same side.

(Ann Staal, same reference as noted above.)

Ann has hit the nail squarely. We're not talking about cosmic conflict here. We're talking about *criminality* and the environment within which criminality thrives. Reducing the issue to that base and *basic* level, there are a whole lot of actions in the recent past that must be examined, not least the American-Israeli

conspiracy to devastate Lebanon, an operation long-planned awaiting only its pretext. The Military-Industrial Complex has a lot to answer for. In the end, it must be *made* to answer.

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So let's get back to the naked emperor.

What distresses Ann Staal, Kenneth Cragg and many of us in these days is an awareness of falsity that breeds enmity. An environment redolent with enmity leads into a kind of paralysis that cripples our dealing with our own irrationalities and taming our hysterias. Because of the irrational way we have allowed the Bush administration to use language (and, hence construct policy) the United States, “no longer ... ruler of her own spirit,” and now thoroughly embroiled in “foreign wars of interest and intrigue,” has become more and more deeply committed to trigger a ‘clash of cultures and religions’ and that, in certain politically influential circles, is code for ‘Armageddon’ — the apocalyptic conflagration in which ‘Israel’ will be incinerated yet again. Support the state of Israel so as to achieve another Jewish ... this time largely autogenous ... Holocaust?! Criminal! Ghoulis!

As we witness debacle after debacle in the ‘global terror’ game we also see religious communities polarize. Bridges bombed into rubble aren't rebuilt between people of goodwill; screechings of xenophobia drown out voices of rationality; neighbor from neighbor is alienated by fear and suspicion; hate and bigotry become easy options, accessible to anyone, especially the vulnerable and enraged. And what we need (as Hans Christian Anderson well knew) is the voice of the little child to lead us (Isaiah 11:06) back to sanity: “But the Emperor has nothing on!”

And I greet you from the lands of the morning.