



Getting Culture Right

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One of these days I hope to catch up with myself in framing these meditations. But that day is not yet and it may be several months off. I let October get away from me. Please accept my apologies. But as the saying goes, 'Better late than never.'

Recently I have been pushed in various directions by world events and by the work I've been doing. However, one of the little tidbits I've picked up recently is that, by the best estimates, 0.002% of all Muslims are what you may call fanatic. The rest (99.998%) are just ordinary 'Joes' and 'Joesays' like you and me and Nancy. Were this percentage to rise to 1% we'd all be in serious trouble. That would change society dramatically. But the percentage is still vanishingly small. And for that window of opportunity we may all give thanks. But just what opportunity are we talking about?

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I have recently been translating an article by 'Abd-ur-Razzâq ad-Duwayy, a Moroccan scholar, on the ethics of inter-cultural dialogue and what it means to be different within that process. As a westerner myself, it has been an eye-opener.

Getting our cultural identity and context right is no easy task. It is a task that must be undertaken from generation to generation not least of all because culture is such a plastic and malleable thing. But each culture carries with it certain 'root stock' that changes very little and very slowly. We carry with us a lot of baggage that we don't even know we have. Most of the time we do not even feel its drag. The mountain of valises and suitcases and plastic bags full of cultural junk is just there, one piece piled up on top of another on our mental pallets, from the time we were barely able to understand words ... much less manipulate thoughts. And those pieces of baggage are difficult to sort out far less jettison, not least of all because we often don't even know they're there. And a good many of the archetypal ideas in the loads we drag along with us engender in us knee-jerk prejudices and preconceptions with regard to those who are different.

And that is the point ad-Duwayy is trying to make. Our baggage is cultural stuff not quite genetically inbred, but certainly inculcated right along with the fairy stories, nursery rhymes and aphorisms that for the life of us we just can't quite shake. They virtually never have anything to do with religion *per se*, even though they dribble over into our religious consciousness and diddle with our functional theology. They are just in our psyches and control how we react and respond. They are culture and we really do need to look at them more dispassionately than we are usually wont to do.

Ad-Duwayy begins by arguing that we must adopt a conciliatory frame of mind if we (Muslim, Jewish, Christian and other) really intend to work for a world at peace, a frame

of mind that sees people of other cultures as equals and neighbors. Westerners, these days, are just not very good at that. Our culture breeds us to be aggressive and, yes, self-serving. Communism and Socialism, although invented in the West, never really had a chance in the long run. It is the mercantile and capitalist philosophies that have been bred into us, and those bleed directly into aggressive behavior and, on the political level, into imperialism — political, military, economic and cultural.

What initially shocked me in ad-Duwayy's study was his contention that, from early on, we westerners have harbored a subliminal hatred toward the dominant culture of the East and toward Muslim individuals in general. While not quite primeval, these fixations are with us, and may have something to do with the fact that we are deeply indebted to Muslim and to Arab culture in general, a debt to which we are loath to admit. Muslims incarnate the image of the quintessential enemy for our putative 'Christian' culture at least since the Spanish *Reconquiste* and the Crusades. And now, after 9/11, that is only confirmed. Anyone who argues against that is seen to be seditious.

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Our Moroccan scholar notes that never before have we been able to communicate so quickly and so intimately worldwide, but also never before have we experienced how sharply we (that is, the world community) diverge with respect to culture. And there's an inherent tension there. He says, "It is impossible, illogical and quite unacceptable, on its own, that any one fraction of humanity in today's world collage may define the overall baseline and impose itself upon all other peoples and all other cultures." And yet that is precisely what we have done.

He says, "We have no doubt about just how important inter-cultural dialogue has become for our modern world. Culturally it is the only viable option for nurturing relationships between peoples. But at the same time we jealously affirm that inter-cultural dialogue must have principles and a code of ethics." And he continues, "So far as we can see, only in this framework can the drive to reconciliation effectively lay credible foundations for peaceful coexistence between cultures and promote initiatives for dialogue between them, defying hatred, alienation, rejection and the cavalier dismissal of those who specifically belong to different societies and cultures."

He goes on, "The notion of reconciliation — as it is currently being articulated [particularly in UN documents] — has acquired a new connotation that clarifies it as an international ethical and legal principle that is underpinned by fundamental principles of human rights, acceptance of the rights of others, and the right to be culturally different." And he adds, "To claim that any one culture has the sole claim upon truth over against all others, and exclusively contains the sum total of transcendent ethical values inevitably yields to blind bigotry and to tyranny on the world's stage." His assessment is, "All parties must be clear that a rational, valid and constructive inter-cultural dialogue will have nothing to do either with propaganda (*da'wah*) or with evangelization (*tabshîr*)."

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This is heady stuff!

As ad-Duwayy observes, everything points in the opposite direction in our western cultural experience. We have a hard time accepting other cultures as equals. We really *do* want to be dominant. We want to be the global cultural norm ... and that implies also the sub-cultural religious norm. As the Internet expands and all the world's peoples 'get on line', the cultural and religious pressure grows more intense, and the notion of dialogue and cultural equality becomes more confused and flails about. The specific gravity of western culture becomes more loaded and dense. Things begin to polarize.

Ad-Duwayy further remarks that ... "[i]t appears the West's cultural identity is possessed by a superiority complex, the conviction that it is notches above other cultural identities. This is clear in spite of those who, in the name of western culture, take care to engage other cultures in the name of the values of modernity, secularism and democracy, and sloganeer about the need for openness and inter-cultural dialogue."

And that's where we are today. How one goes about reversing it isn't clear, but the world at large perceives the West (and particularly the United States) as not only a political, economic and military imperialist (which doesn't take a lot of imagination to affirm) but also a cultural, artistic, culinary and technological imperialist. And the groundswell in the Arab and Islamic worlds is to respond in denial. That denial, all too often, takes the form of fanaticism that has a religious patina. It is simply denial but needs a boost from religious verbiage. And that is having its effect.

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What ad-Duwayy and others are saying is that, if we want to keep 33.5% of the world from becoming radicalized, the other 66.5% had better wake up. And westerners had better lead this new renaissance not least of all because they have helped precipitate us into a new 'dark ages'. The recent open letter signed by 138 prominent Muslim persons and entitled, 'A Common Word Between Us and You', addressed to Christian and Jewish leaders throughout the world, calls us to account at a crucial moment not only for us but also for the Muslim community. Muslims need some help.

Yes, only 0.002% of Muslims are now radical, but if the trend in the 'globalization wars' continues, a whole lot more might well become involved. That's just how the dynamics are now working. And we've got to stop this thing from working itself out into a global fiasco.

Listen up, folks! We can do something about this thing.

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.