THE MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY: SECULARISM, CHRISTIANITY, JUDAISM AND ISLAM - A FALSE CONFRONTATION OF VALUES?

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In the wake of the end of the cold war and ideological confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States some western ideologues and politicians are raising the spectre of another period of turmoil and conflict based this time on religious differences. They foresee a threat to western values and culture challenge to its recent ideological “triumph” from a resurgent Islam based on the latter’s growing numerical economic and military strength. This indeed is an ominous signal at a time when peace and co-operation is most essential.

The world today is passing through a period of rapid change. The unprecedented proliferation of knowledge, information and technology is expanding the horizon of the world that we have long known. Globalisation made possible by revolutionary developments in information and communications technology has on the one hand brought peoples and nations closer together and on the other made them interdependent as never before.

Problems in under-developed and war-torn countries are leading to exoduses of their people towards a better future in Europe. Although illegal immigration is rife in our time, Europe’s economy is moving to a point where it is going to need an influx of immigrants to strengthen its workforce.

Thus, a multicultural society is today inevitable. Followers of the World’s greatest religions come to live together as one nation. Jews, Christians and Muslims have become neighbors, literally. And this phenomenon will only grow in the future.

The question is, can Jews, Christians and Muslims live together in peace? Will they be able to live as one nation? Or will there be a confrontation of values? And what about the secular state, which must legislate for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike? Can citizens of a secular state, who actively practice their respective religions, be active in social and political life? Or will they become marginalized?
These are the challenges which the multicultural society must face in our time.

**Migration**

For the past few years, especially during the warm summer months, we have seen hundreds of migrants arriving on our shores illegally by boat. Most of them never wanted to land here, but had their sights set on mainland Europe.

The overwhelming number of arrivals had its toll on the Maltese, and the issues of racism, culture, religion were all brought up. The Maltese are, to a certain extent, divided regarding the issue. Opinions varied, some were extreme. A fear that a large influx of people would change our culture and religion was and still is present. However, the general idea is that our island is too small to take large numbers of immigrants, so a solution must be found for these people in other, larger, countries.

The attitude towards migration is not only defined by rational arguments. Even though we can prove that increasing migration has both a cultural and economic advantage to our society, this still does not have to lead to a different attitude towards ‘foreigners’. We have to consider which conditions in our thinking are necessary to change our attitude towards the ‘foreigner’. The way we think about ‘foreigners’ has in essence much to do with the way we perceive ourselves.

One of the most important foundations for a policy that does not welcome the foreigner (of the restrictive foreigner’s policy) is the fear that comes from the sense of threat. The foreigner is perceived as a threat. Not only because of the number of foreigners that would arrive but more importantly because of the unknown. This implies evading a confrontation with the ‘difference’. To maintain the evasion there follows aversion, also because of a misplaced sense of superiority. We see ourselves as highly civilized and developed against others who are less civil and developed.

Chenjerai Hove, a writer from Zimbabwe wrote: “……I resent living in a country where everyone thinks and says the same. That is boring. I want to see straight and crooked noses, weird, ugly and beautiful faces. That is my ideal. That is why I put colour in my work”.

**The Multicultural Society from a Muslim Point of View**

The Muslim, acknowledging one Creator, sees humanity as one. Thus, to the Muslim, colour, race and language - the obvious external differences within the family of man - are signs of God’s wondrous creativity, the God-ordained diversity of mankind within its overall unity. Such outward differences can never constitute a reason for either looking up to or despising another individual, for the only criteria Islam acknowledges for distinction or greatness among human beings are spiritual and moral qualities such as the excellence of a person’s character.
Judaism, Christianity and Islam - Common Values

All great near eastern religions including Islam, Christianity and Judaism have a similar origin, background and historical context. Jews, Christians and Muslims all revere Abraham as a Patriarch or a great prophet. Jews, Christians and Muslims also revere Moses, while Muslims have great respect for Jesus, although Islam and Christianity differ regarding the nature of Jesus and his mission on Earth.

Many important elements are common between Islam and Christianity. Muslims and Christians share many similar beliefs, values, moral injunctions and principles of behaviour. Christians and Muslims believe in God the Creator, who is Eternal, Merciful, Forgiving and Just.

Jews are regarded by Muslims as ‘People of the Book’, along with Christians, because God had conveyed to them his Divine Guidance through Divine Scriptures revealed to different Prophets.

Jews and Christians lived alongside a majority of Palestinian Muslims for hundreds of years in Palestine, and problems only started when an official Jewish state was declared on Palestinian land in 1948. Problems aggravated when, after 1967, more lands were annexed to the state of Israel. But conflicts here are not of a religious nature.

Each of these three religions has played a vital role in inculcating a spirit of mutual accommodation and a sense of compassion and brotherhood among human beings irrespective of their differences in faith, colour or creed. This has often been a driving force for social reforms and checking oppression, injustice and exploitation. An important contribution of religion is the promotion of a moral code and ethical principles and precepts. It has provided a global view of the world to its adherents, which traditionally remained limited to tribal and family matters.

In any case, the world has come a long way from the middle ages when religious strife and sectarian conflicts marked relations between and among different communities and disturbed peace and stability in the society. For centuries, people of different faith lived side by side in peace and amity in the near east, south Asia, Europe and elsewhere. No doubt, there were pockets marked by bloodshed, rivalry and competition but except for the crusades, which had their own peculiar driving force, these were essentially localized.

The Muslim and the Christian communities today constitute about 20% and 25% of the global population respectively. It would be unthinkable for such big communities to live in conflict and confrontation. Apart from the force of interdependence in an era of globalization to which reference has already been made, the emergence of what writers like V S Naipul describe as a “universal civilization and cultural coming together of humanity and increasing acceptance of common values, beliefs, orientations and practices” would strongly argue against any such conflict along “fault lines” dividing civilisations. The need of the hour is to launch a concerted effort by public leaders, religious scholars, academics and civil society to highlight the common message of universal brotherhood, friendship and
harmony which are the main themes of all religions and to work unitedly towards a prosperous, stable and harmonious international community.

**Secularism**

Secularism started in the West as a response to ‘theocratic’ systems where the state imposed the law of Religion on its citizens, so that the law of the state and religious law were one and the same.

Secularism today makes a distinction between state and religion. In a secular society, citizens are allowed to practice any religion, as long as the law of the state is not broken. Also, when legislating, the government of a secular state is not guided by the laws of any religion but by a set of values which, in many societies, is called a constitution.

There are, however, various levels of secularism. In Malta, for example, which is a secular state, the President of the Republic has stated various times that he would not endorse a law which goes against his set of values and beliefs. And that is his right. Again in Malta, divorce is illegal, even for a marriage constituted only under Maltese law. This is because the Maltese Government is Roman Catholic and divorce is prohibited in the Roman Catholic Religion.

Having said the above, can citizens who practice Judaism, Christianity and Islam live in harmony with the law in a secular state? The answer would generally be yes, because a secular state normally does not prohibit its citizens from practicing their religion freely, neither does it make them do what is prohibited in their religion.

No secular state, for example, forces Jews to work on Saturday, Christians to use artificial contraception, or Muslims to drink alcohol. Nonetheless, there are exceptions. The prohibition of girls and women wearing the Muslim headscarves in government places in France is a classic case. Here, even though a Muslim girl or woman is obliged to cover her hair according to her Religion, the state has prohibited her from doing so. This law did not affect Jews and Christians in the same manner, since Jews are not obliged to wear the star of David, neither are Christians obliged to wear crucifixes.

But in the main, there is no conflict as regards religion and a secular state.

**Approaching Multi-Culturalism**

There are generally three approaches to multiculturalism. The first approach is intolerance, taking the extreme form of killing biologically or socially (marginalization) other cultures; or imprinting on them the culture of the invader / colonizer / empire builder. Nothing compares to Western imperialism in its extreme asymmetry, imposing language, body language and religion, barely assimilating some spices and dishes into their own culture. The idea of possessing the only valid faith, as in the Papal Bull of May 4, 1493, Inter Caetera set the tone; handing over territories (even yet to be discovered) to the Spanish Kings.
The second approach is tolerance, better than intolerance, but only a passive, peaceful coexistence, essentially signaling that “I am generous that I tolerate that you exist”. This opens for a world of (dominant) nation states that tolerate each other, better than imperialism with a cultural component. And it opens for human rights inside the states, protecting ‘minorities’. The formula facilitates a transition from a multicultural world to multicultural societies. But this is not good enough in a world where different cultures will have ever broader and deeper contact.

If intolerance leads to being denied, then obviously the latter prevails. The dominant culture has won. Some compromises may be carved out as small niches for one’s own culture.

The third approach is dialogue, based on mutual respect and curiosity like “how wonderful that you are different from me, then we can learn from each other and maybe develop something new!” This is not a debate, which is a form of warfare with verbal means, to show that the other side is false / wrong / bad / ugly / profane. A major step forward for a multicultural society is with the parts seeing each other as sources of mutual enrichment. It is not frequent. But this active peaceful coexistence is clearly a jump forward.

**Conclusion**

We must open our hearts and minds to each other. Instead of sensing danger when somebody is different from me, then let us be filled with joy at the opportunity to learn, to enrich and be enriched, to live in peace and create peace. We must have a lifelong dedication to increasing knowledge and sensitivity to major multicultural groups, by learning about their values, customs, world views, political history and contributions to humanity.

In the emerging reality of the “global village” international peace, co-operation and understanding is a vital imperative. This alone can sustain and promote common aspirations of human kind to live a prosperous and purposeful life in peace, security and dignity.

Experiences of recent years have amply demonstrated that cooperation and understanding among nations create the environment conducive to attaining these common objectives. Equally, conflict and acrimony in any part of the world can vitiate the atmosphere even in far away lands.

Whilst keeping the basic message of devotion let us find new ways, acts and words to live together in harmony. It is within the spirit of freedom of interpretation of one’s own religion that genuine respect for other religions can evolve.

Let the future be an era of active peace built in our hearts and our minds, and enacted in our deeds.