

Tolerance and Non-Violence in a World That Needs to Be Transformed

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François Houtart, Honorary President of the BRussells Tribunal, receives 2009 UNESCO-Madanjeet Singh Prize for the Promotion of Tolerance and Non-Violence For his life-long commitment to world peace, intercultural dialogue, human rights and the promotion of tolerance, and in recognition of his outstanding efforts to advance the cause of social justice in the world. Acceptance speech at the Prize-giving ceremony, held on International Day for Tolerance, celebrated every year on 16 November.

Millions of people deserve the Madansheet Singh prize: all those who, by combining their efforts in spite of their differences of culture, religion and philosophical convictions, have not lost their hope of transforming a world subjected to the logic of the market. In response to the cries of the oppressed and those of the earth, they are trying to build societies in which justice becomes a central value and spirituality regain its rightful place. This is the reason why it is worthwhile reflecting, in the spirit of this prize, on tolerance and non-violence in a world that needs to be transformed.

To put tolerance into practice presupposes the recognition that there are situations that cannot be tolerated. The financial speculation, which is largely responsible for the food crises in 2007 and 2008, thrust more than 100 million people below the poverty threshold, into destitution and hunger. That is intolerable.

To emit increasing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, while devastating the places that absorb them like the forests and oceans, is also just as intolerable. Lobbying the international organizations, at the European and world level, like the United Nations Conference on Climate Change, in order that the rights of the market prevail over the rights to life, is intolerable. To establish networks of military bases over the planet to control natural resources, especially of energy, and not to hesitate in launching war to guarantee such control: this also is intolerable.

To promote and reproduce an economy that creates immense wealth that ignore externalities – that is, the ecological and social destruction that is not taken into account in economic calculations – is intolerable. To accept that the distribution of assets serves as a source of inequality never attained before in history is no less intolerable. True, millions of people have also risen out of poverty but at the same time hundreds of millions of others have stayed there or been precipitated into destitution, which is intolerable.

As for non-violence being a basic element in human relationships, this requires tackling the causes of violence, that is, the economic, social and political structures that oppress people and groups, to the point of denying them the right to exist. The advance of humanity is

strewn with struggles and their violence or non-violence testifies to the refusal of the dominant classes to cede their power and their privileges. Today, the convergence of social resistance has become the means of creating a new historical subject in the progress towards emancipation. The movements of landless peasants, worker unions, indigenous peoples' movements, women's movements, religious organizations, committed intellectuals, political regroupings can tilt the balance of power, thus making it possible to build other kinds of society.

To this end, over the course of the last decade, the World and Regional Social Forums have contributed in creating a new dynamic, built on mutual respect of all those who, according to its founding charter, are struggling against capitalism, against all structures of injustice, and who want to build alternatives. Obviously, the Forums must inspire political projects, which we are already seeing in several countries and regions of the world, particularly in Latin America., after the Cuban revolution, more recently in countries like Brasil, Venezuela, Bolivia and Eciador.

Moreover, returning to the problem of violence, there is no doubt that using terrorist methods must be condemned as ethically unacceptable, from wherever they come, even if the despair from seemingly hopeless situations unfortunately leads to this type of resistance. But it is also necessary to reject State terrorism in all its forms.

All this leads us to pose the question of alternatives and the new paradigms necessary to ensure the continuity of human life on the planet. To achieve this there are four basic principles to be followed. First there must be another relationship between humankind and nature: no longer exploitation but respect for it as the source of life, which involves its sustainable and responsible use, public control over natural resources and a status for the common heritage of humankind of what is essential to life, such as water and seeds.

A second paradigm concerns the production of goods and services, giving use value priority over exchange value, which fundamentally transforms the definition of the economy. In such a case surplus value would no longer be appropriated by a minority holding decision-making power, but rather an activity that produces the basis of the physical, cultural and spiritual life of all human beings on earth.

The third paradigm concerns the organization of social and political life through a generalization of democracy in all human relationships - not only political, but also economic, social, cultural, religious and, especially, those between men and women. What is at stake is the return of the citizen as both an individual and collective actor, which involves, among other things, a redefinition of the State and of international organizations.

Finally, it is necessary to understand reality and build it on ethical grounds - the faculty peculiar to human beings - in other words, culture. which is necessarily multicultural. No longer is human development to be identical with westernization. Each cultural tradition, all knowledge, each philosophy and all religions have their contribution to make to the whole, both for its construction and disseminating it in all languages.

Is this utopia? Yes, but it is a utopia necessary for the survival of humanity and of the planet, not of the illusory kind but rather of what does not exist today, but could be achieved tomorrow. And this utopia is already at work in thousands of initiatives: multiple resistance against the practices of death, actions to protect the earth, the organization of a

social economy and the re-establishment of public services, forms of participatory democracy and the development of new concepts and visions of the world that are not reduced to elementaries. All that already contributes to a redefinition of the common good of humanity. The great challenge is to give a theoretical and practical coherence to it all, which also requires a profound cultural transformation.

So, therefore, why not propose a Universal Declaration of the Common Good of Humanity, based on the above four paradigms, which would complete the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Utopia, perhaps? True, human rights took 200 years to become universal and they are maybe too incomplete, too western and used politically by certain powers to consolidate their hegemony in the world. But that charter has the merit of existing and it has saved the life and liberty of many people in the world.

Could it not be a valuable task for Unesco to promote the emergence of a new Universal Declaration? It is also the task of culture and education to transform the paradigms of human development. Such an initiative would help to fix a star in the skies that would guide the struggles for justice and the long journey of humankind, while providing hope for the future.

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