



Rencontre le 13 septembre avec Dr. Chandra Muzaffar sur « le dialogue des civilisations »

La rencontre avec Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, président malaisien du réseau international JUST, a permis de riches échanges sur la question du « dialogue des civilisations », un axe central de travail pour le Centre Lebret-Irfed. Une question qui a encore gagné en actualité avec les événements récents en Palestine et au Liban. Comment répondre aujourd'hui à la montée des conflits, des guerres, du racisme et de l'Islamophobie ? Le principe de la laïcité est-il suffisant pour répondre au pouvoir politique croissant des fondamentalismes religieux (chrétien, hindou, juif, musulman...) ? Comment les migrants se situent-ils dans ce contexte « identitaire » et comment construire la solidarité entre travailleurs nationaux et immigrés dans une situation de chômage massive ? Comment empêcher que l'affirmation des identités ne deviennent une autre expression de domination envers l'autre ?

C. Muzaffar a rappelé que 2001 avait été désignée « année du dialogue des civilisations », mais s'est terminée par la catastrophe du 11 septembre et les discours sur le « choc » des civilisations, notamment occidentale et « islamique. » Le rapport entre civilisations, selon lui, était déjà difficile avant cela. S'il s'agissait dans le passé d'occupations de territoires (les occupations musulmanes en Europe, les Croisades, le colonialisme...), aujourd'hui ces tensions sont liées à l'enjeu pétrolier. D'autres facteurs ont aggravé les choses : Guantanamo et la torture, le harcèlement des Musulmans, la situation au Liban et à Gaza... Contrairement à ce que beaucoup pensent, C. Muzaffar juge que les actes de terreur qui ont engendré la peur (chez les Musulmans aussi) sont des réponses aux occupations plutôt qu'à la pauvreté. Face à ce défi planétaire, une alliance entre peuples de l'Occident et du monde musulman est plus que jamais nécessaire.



Talk by Chandra Muzaffar*, President of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST)
Meeting on the Dialogue of Civilisations organized by DCLI
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Friends, peace be with you.

I'd like to thank the Centre for arranging this meeting. I was in Paris the last three days for another function which was also related to dialogue. It was a media conference, at the UNESCO building, organized by a number of media outlets in Europe and Asia, looking at the role of media in promoting dialogue between Asia and Europe. UNESCO itself was one of the co-sponsors of this conference.

Now, what I'd like to do this evening, friends, is to locate the dialogue of civilizations in the context of the event that was observed a couple of days ago: September 11. The world had commemorated the 5th anniversary of September. 11. I would like to link these two very important concerns: Dialogue of Civilizations and Sept. 11.

There is a link which many of us may not be aware of. 'September 11' happened on the 11th of September 2001. 2001 was actually the year designated by the United Nations as the year of the Dialogue of Civilizations, which in a sense is ironical, because it was the year which ended up in a catastrophe like September 11...which in some ways brought to the fore the crisis of civilizations. What was supposed to be a dialogue of civilizations revealed a crisis in the relationship between civilizations, especially between what is known as the West and what is known as Islamic civilization.

Now, since September 11, 2001, in the last 5 years, relations between the two civilizations have worsened considerably. This is an indisputable fact. Before looking at how the situation has become much worse, and why, let me preface my reflections by saying this: the relationship between what is known as the West and what is known as Islam has always been problematic. We are deceiving ourselves if we think that before September 11, the situation was good. It was not.

It has never been good, as far as these two civilizations are concerned, for a variety of reasons. It is linked to Muslim occupation of parts of Europe, from the middle of the 8th century onwards. (As you know, Europe had never been occupied by any other civilization.) It is linked to the Christian Crusades, stretching over 200 years. It is linked to Western colonialism, stretching over 500 years. This is the past.

In contemporary times, it is linked to oil which is, without any doubt at all, a major reason why the relationship between the West and Islam has been so



problematic. To put it in very graphic terms, the most important oil exporting region of the world is a region that is populated by Muslims. And oil, as we know, is the life-blood of Western industrial civilization. Without oil, industrial civilization comes to an end. So, you have the centres of power in the West, at the helm of this civilization, wanting to control the oil, which flows beneath the feet of Muslims. If you don't believe this, just reflect on what has happened in the last few decades in West Asia.

In 1953, a popularly elected Prime Minister, Mohammed Mossadegh was overthrown by the CIA, in a coup in Iran. A secular, democratic leader overthrown and replaced by the Shah of Iran whose position was restored and reinforced by the CIA. And it has gone on and on, from 1953 to 2003. In 2003, you had the invasion of Iraq. And in between, the nationalization of oil in Libya in 1969, in Iraq in 1972, you have the nationalization of oil in Iran, again, in 1979, and so on and so forth... So, this has been a very important factor.

The other factor is Israel. Since the creation of Israel in 1948, West Asia has been in turmoil. The Arab and Palestinian rejection of Israel did not begin with 1948. The rejection began in 1882, when Zionist settlements were first established in Palestine. And it went on for decades; the push for Zionist settlements was provided by the Balfour Declaration of 1917. It was the British who had authority over Palestine, at that time. The Declaration led to a tremendous increase in Zionist settlements which was resisted by the Palestinian population from the beginning. 1921, there was a major revolt on the part of the Palestinian population. It was crushed by the British. 1936, there was another huge revolt, a non-violent uprising which was also crushed by the British. But then, you know what happened: The War, the Holocaust... and Europe wanted to assuage its conscience... so, it established Israel right there in the heart of the Arab world. And we are seeing the consequences of that to this day. Because, you know that Israel has fortified its position, has expanded its territories; there have been wars after wars, and the turmoil goes on.

Lebanon and what we witnessed a few weeks ago was actually an extension of the Palestinian crisis. This is why, when people say we'll solve the Lebanese crisis by asking the Hezbollah to disarm, it's just amazing! Asking the Hezbollah to disarm when you know that the Hezbollah is a response to Israel. And it is a response to invasion and occupation. The Hezbollah is very much a part of Lebanese society; it is a resistance movement resisting Israel occupation and hegemony.

Because the US is the patron of Israel and often does Israel's bidding, and because the rest of the West is also very protective of Israel, Palestinians and Arabs and indeed Muslims as a whole are disappointed and angry with the West, specifically the US. In other words, it because of Israel that the chasm between the Muslim world and the West is growing wider and wider. The Western bias towards Israel which is blatant and the resulting double standards have hurt Muslims deeply.

There is perhaps a third reason, not as significant as the first two, which is also responsible for the deteriorating ties between the West and the Muslim world. It is the increasingly important presence of Muslim minorities all over the West. This is new. It is a phenomenon of the last 20 years. There is a crucial Muslim minority in Denmark, Norway, right down to Spain, Italy - almost every country in Europe - and



of course in Canada and in the USA. Today, the Muslim population of the USA is bigger than its Jewish population. It has become a very significant minority, a distinguishable minority.

In a sense, the Muslims of the West have become 'the other' whose separate identity is sometimes reinforced by symbols such as the hijab. There are other aspects too in the life of a Muslim which may create a bit of distance between the Muslim and the ordinary Westerner such as the former's abstinence from liquor or dietary rules or daily prayers. When some Western governments and societies ride roughshod over these differences, it heightens Muslim resentment which sometimes expresses itself through further assertion of a narrow and bigoted notion of identity.

These then are some of the contemporary factors that have aggravated relations between the West and the Muslim world. Now, with that as background, just look at the situation that confronts us today. We've had one incident after another, exacerbating this already problematic scenario. Of course, first, Sept. 11, 2001 and then, of course, we had the invasion of Afghanistan in Oct. 2001 and then a year later, 12th Oct., 2002, there was Bali Bombings. They're all linked to one another, in different ways. And then, after that, we had Iraq, 2003, Madrid, March 2004, London, July 2005, Lebanon, 2006. And there may be other episodes in the future. Syria. Sudan. Perhaps, Iran. This is the unending tragedy of West Asia and other parts of the world which are somehow linked to the West Asia crisis.

And then, of course, we have other factors that have impacted negatively upon ties between the two civilizations : Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, Bagram. These are places where torture had taken place. Humiliation, indignities heaped upon the prisoners, almost all of them Muslim. And then, of course the harassment, the hounding, the stereotyping, the prejudices which Sally referred to as Islamophobia, a phenomenon which has become much, much more serious than ever before. Of course, Islamophobia is an ancient phenomenon. It has been there for a long, long while, in the history of relations between the West and the Muslim world. But today, it has taken a turn for the worse.

Now, let's look deeper into this problematic relationship. As far as the West is concerned, and I use the term in a very loose manner (It's not right to use it in this way because the West is very complex, just as the Muslim world is very complex.) the root cause of the problem today is terrorism, the violence of Muslim radicals in Madrid, London or New York. All these acts of terror have struck something very deep in the Western psyche.

There is a great fear that life as the West has known it for a couple of centuries is no longer guaranteed, because of acts of terror. It is a fear that is pervasive. It is the sort of fear which politicians have been able to manipulate, whether it is George W. Bush, in the USA, or Tony Blair, in Britain. They have been able to manipulate this fear that the Western lifestyle is threatened by 'Islamic' terrorism.

At the same time, there's something else. There is also fear, related to these acts of terror, of a religious resurgence - Islamic resurgence to be precise - which allegedly seeks to undermine the secular values of the West. Foremost among these



values is of course freedom which is presented as the hallmark of Western civilization.

On the Muslim side, they too live in great fear--- fear of bombs and missiles, which have already killed tens of thousands of people. As you know, many, many more Arabs and Muslims have been killed as a result of the events of the last few years than people in the USA and Europe. Just look at Iraq. The Johns Hopkins University study of March 2004 showed that 100,000 had died after the invasion and occupation of Iraq. And if you look at what had happened in Lebanon, of the 1200 killed, almost 1/3 were children. This perhaps is one of the rare wars in history where there has been such a high percentage of child victims. This is partly because civilian sites were actually the targets in many instances. And many more will die in the near future because the Israelis have left behind a 100,000 bomblets in Southern Lebanon. You know, these are the cluster bombs and children sometimes play with these weapons of war, without knowing what they are and they get blown off, injured or killed. This is the reality that confronts us.

So among Muslims and others who are victims of hegemony, there is this fear that bombs would rain upon their city, that anytime missiles could strike their homes. And for some of them, there is something else besides missiles and bombs, if you look at what has been happening in Palestine. Anytime, a father can be dragged out of his home, and thrown into jail. There are 10,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails. We are focusing upon one Israeli soldier who had been captured by Palestinians but we forget that there are 10,000 Palestinians in Israeli jails. And we forget that for the first time in history, 1/3 of the cabinet of an elected government has been thrown behind bars by an occupying power. The Deputy Prime Minister, the Speaker, they're all behind bars. And the world is not even outraged that things like this have happened, especially those who claim to be champions of democracy.

This leads me to what I think is the most fundamental disappointment in the Muslim world about the West. And I think it should be conveyed in stark terms to people in the West. The feeling among a lot of Muslims is that the centres of power in the West are in no mood to admit that it is their hegemony, their control over other people's lands and resources, over other people's lives, that is the root problem. If Muslims are reacting through violence it is because they have lost their home and hearth; and anyone would react that way. Occupied people right through history have stood up against occupation. Name me an occupied people who have not resisted occupation---often with arms.

This is clearly underscored in the recently completed study of suicide bombers and terrorism by Professor Robert Pape of the University of Chicago. His study shows that the major reason why people turn to terror is occupation. It has very little to do with religion. In fact, he discovered that among the 38 suicide bombers in Lebanon, involved in terror attacks in the wake of the Israeli invasion of their country in 1982, the majority were secular in orientation. A number of them had communist leanings. Only 9 out of 38 had deep Islamic convictions, 3 of them were in fact Christians.

The conclusion that Pape and others have drawn from all their research is that whether you look at the Muslim world, or at Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers, or at Colombia, or at Northern Ireland, it is occupation which prompts people to lay down



their lives. Because it means losing their identity, losing their self-respect. And amongst the Muslim victims of occupation the feeling is that somehow the centres of power in the West don't want to come to terms with this. They'll talk about all the other reasons, except this.

I had a taste of this attitude recently, this state of denial among the ruling elites in capitals such as Washington, London, Tel Aviv and Canberra. Just a few days ago, I had a debate with the British High Commissioner to Kuala Lumpur. He and I debated on West Asia. The High Commissioner referred often to Tony Blair's recent speech in Los Angeles to defend the British position on Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon and other such issues. Blair had talked about the importance of addressing the underlying causes of terrorism in West Asia and other parts of the world. He talked about poverty, jobs, marginalization and so on but did not mention occupation at all. . He did not mention the most obvious reason.

It is not poverty that is responsible for acts of terror. You may recruit some individuals who are poor, but don't forget that a lot of those who undertake acts of terror are not poor. And the people who lead movements of this sort are not poor and disenfranchised people struggling to live on the margins of society. Osama bin Laden, from the richest family in Saudi Arabia, outside the feudal monarchical circle of course. One of the most successful neuro-surgeons in Egypt, Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri. Look at the backgrounds of all these people, they're not poor. So, when you talk about poverty as the major cause, you're actually deceiving yourself. The real cause is this: US, British, Israeli occupation of Muslim lands. To put it in very blunt terms, it is imperialism or rather neo-imperialism.

This is the root of the problem of terrorism as we know it today. Al-Qaeda, as a group, came into being to oppose Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Again, occupation. But, as far as the Americans were concerned, fighting that occupation was okay. And they were prepared to give full support to Al-Qaeda, as you know. Al-Qaeda was born in the crucible of the Afghan struggle. After the struggle was over, what do the Al-Qaeda freedom fighters (Mujahideen) do?

Some of the graduates of the Afghan operation decided to come together and oppose the stationing of American troops in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Osama and Al-Qaeda saw it as the occupation of the Holy Land. They warned that they would act. They began by trying to bomb the basement of the World Trade Centre in 1993. In 1996, they bombed the Dhahran Air Base. 19 American airmen were killed at that time. 1998, they attacked the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania; in 2000, they attacked the U.S.S. Cole off Eden in Yemen.

The culmination was Sept.11. And what did they attack? The Pentagon, symbol of American military power; the WTC, linked to American economic power. It is so obvious, what is behind all this. It is all linked to US dominance and the whole pattern of hegemony.

If one is not prepared to come to grips with this, there will be no peace. Because, for the victims, occupation is the epitome of injustice. If you don't deal with this, the problem of occupation and imperialism, there is no way one is going to live in peace. It is as simple as that. I think terrorist acts will proliferate in the future; they



will become much, much worse. Because in a globalized world, in a world where borders and boundaries don't count, where terror technology can be disseminated without much effort, it's going to be very easy for terrorist cells to multiply. This, I think, is the threat that confronts us.

However, there are some silver linings in the midst of the dark clouds. In the West there are numerous groups that are aware that the root problem is occupation and hegemony. They stand up against hegemony, all the protests, whether it is against the war in Iraq, or recently in Lebanon; look at the protests in Britain which are really remarkable. There are lots of people in the West who know that this is the real problem. They don't buy the propaganda of the Bushes and Blairs of this world. This is the glimmer of hope, that in the West itself, or to put it in very stark terms, within the belly of the beast, you have a lot of groups that know what is happening and are prepared to stand up against it.

On the Muslim side, there are many individuals and groups who are angry and unhappy with the sort of senseless, mindless violence that Al-Qaeda in particular is associated with, like making civilians their targets, which is what they do consciously, whether in Iraq or New York or Madrid or London. There are a lot of Muslims who have stood up against such murders of innocent people and will continue to stand up against this sort of violence.

What we need to do is to forge a stronger alliance between people in the West and people in the Muslim world, who share a common perspective on the global challenge of the moment. It is being done, but somehow it hasn't really gathered momentum. Forging this link is perhaps that one most critical task facing civil society groups and people's movements everywhere. They should be aware, for instance, that while they speak from different platforms, they have a common goal and they must commit themselves to this challenge which is: to get rid of hegemony, to achieve more equitable distribution of power and wealth in the world – that is fundamental – and all the other aspects of social transformation at the global level which have always been important to us in relation to environment, the rights of minorities, rights of women and so on. To reiterate, what is fundamental is confronting imperialism, developing a strategy to fight hegemony.

In this regard, I look at Lebanon and I tell myself that we have some reason to hope for the future. The Hezbollah, is an inclusive, accommodative, open-minded Islamic movement, compared to certain other movements in the Arab and Muslim world. It relates well to not only Sunnis but also Christians in Lebanon. From the 1990s Hezbollah began developing close fraternal ties with both the laity and the clergy within the substantial Christian community in the country. There is considerable Christian support for the movement. Besides, Hezbollah, in accordance with Islamic principles, does not discriminate against Sunnis or Christians when it comes to providing assistance or in any of its other activities connected to social justice.

Unfortunately, this aspect of Hezbollah is not highlighted in the mainstream Western media. Consequently, not many people know about Hezbollah's interactions with the Christians of Lebanon. This is not the only instance where the media has failed to emphasize a positive occurrence in the relations between



different religious communities. If some example of inter-faith, or inter-civilisational interaction puts a group which has already been tarnished as 'violent' or 'militant' in a favourable light, the media would rather not bring it to the knowledge of the general public. In this way, the media consciously helps to perpetuate the interests of the hegemonic power of the day.

But we, dissident activists and intellectuals should not just swallow hook, line and sinker the media's biases. We should find out for ourselves what is really happening on the ground especially in conflict situations involving hegemonic power, on the one hand, and resistance movements, on the other. Progressive media sources some of which are available through the net are much better channels of information. By equipping ourselves with the right information and knowledge we would be in a position to appreciate the struggle of genuine groups and movements which are reaching out to one another, across religious and cultural divides. It is their struggles which offer the best hope for the growth of inter-civilisational understanding and accord.

Let us therefore strengthen these struggles against occupation and hegemony in order to build a world where different religions and civilizations can flourish together in justice and peace!

Thank you.

*** Quelques éléments sur Chandra Muzaffar :**

Chandra Muzaffar a été professeur et directeur du Centre pour le dialogue des civilisations de l'Université de Malaya. Il a publié une vingtaine de livres et écrit plus de 500 articles sur ce thème. Aujourd'hui président de JUST (International Movement for a Just World), il travaille en collaboration avec un grand nombre d'ONG internationales impliquées dans la justice sociale et le dialogue entre les civilisations.

JUST est une organisation citoyenne internationale à but non lucratif, qui vise à alerter l'opinion publique internationale sur les injustices inhérentes à la globalisation, et à développer des clés de compréhension de la lutte pour la justice sociale et la dignité humaine au niveau global, dans une approche fondée sur les valeurs spirituelles et morales enracinées dans l'unicité d'un seul Dieu. Elle publie le mensuel « Just Commentary ».

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