

faith and development

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Beyond the 'Clash of Civilisations' Rediscovering our Common Humanity

by Dr. Rama Mani

What are the origins of wars? "*Religions*", reply simplistic minds, in unison. "*Blatant injustices*", insist generous souls, unrelenting in their social consciousness. "*Not at all*", argue sociologists, claiming to be more enlightened than others, "*...the problem comes from ethnicity, from identity.*" Everyone disagrees on the issue, except on one point: this planet is endangered.

Experts may argue on the question of what really causes war and terrorism, but, perhaps they will be able to admit that the most difficult conflicts sometimes – or often – hide deep roots that need to be unearthed and analyzed. The process is complex. During the Mumbai (Bombay) World Social Forum, in India, a workshop dedicated to "*Spiritualities and Identities in the Dialogue of Civilisations*" was held, under the auspices of AREDS (Association for Rural Education and Development Service) in India, in partnership with the Centre Lebret.¹

Among the talks given by the guest speakers, we have decided to present that of Rama Mani who is herself dedicated to promoting peace in developing countries. The author spent her childhood in Mumbai where she lived the unfortunately lost times of "harmonious understanding among communities." She has done missions in Afghanistan, in Guatemala, in Uganda...She knows what she is talking about.

In her presentation, Rama Mani evokes the theme of searching for a "common humanity", which goes beyond conflict or the "clash of civilisations" which everyone has been talking about since Samuel P. Huntington's much disputed book. For Rama Mani, "*the key factor in most conflicts is a combination of grievance and greed*". Will her thesis convince you? In any case, the proof is in your hands.

Albert Longchamp

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The world at large is morbidly fascinated by violent conflict. Yet, whether we be politicians or journalists, peace activists or humanitarians, academics or laymen, we all tend to divorce the question of peace and conflict from that of justice and injustice.

Scholars and self-proclaimed experts have proliferated theories of why conflicts occur today, and political leaders and the media have popularised them. There is a misguided belief that we 'know' without the shadow of a doubt why these savage conflicts occur, and why they are concentrated primarily in the poorest and most destitute parts of the world and only rarely in industrialised western countries.

There is a conviction that we 'understand' the reasons for the current plague of Al-Qaeda style 'terrorism'. Experts confidently proclaim that we are living in an age of *identity* conflicts; that we are witnessing the clash of civilisations, cultures, religions and classes. They believe it is the depraved and angry poor versus the innocent and pacific rich; it is the fundamentalist Muslims against the loving Christians; it is the anti-democratic misogynist South against the democratic egalitarian North.

I ask, is this really so? What really causes conflict and what really underpins peace?

Causes of Terrorism

Over the past decade I have dedicated myself to addressing issues of peace and justice particularly in Africa and other parts of the developing world. In just the last 12 months, between the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil in January 2003 and in Mumbai, India in January 2004, I was privileged and humbled to travel to diverse countries engaged in various stages of war and peace-building. And therefore, I glimpsed the reality under the popular theories that experts believe cause wars and terrorism.

In February 2003, I was in Sri Lanka, as it began to struggle its way out of decades-long conflict, into which it appears ready to slip back again today. 'Ethnic conflict!', the experts would rush to proclaim, 'between the Tamil minority and the Sinhala² majority. Religious conflict! between the Buddhist majority and the Hindu and Muslim minority.' The decades of opportunistic political marginalisation of minorities by the majority, and the erosion of the intrinsically tolerant and multi-cultural nature of this *Dharma Dweepa* or "Island of many faiths" is rarely explored.

In March 2002, I was in India (lecturing, poignantly, at a Gandhian institute in Mumbai and at the Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi). 'Nuclear war!' the experts would shriek, 'Weapons of mass destruction in irresponsible hands!' International political and media attention focuses only on the mutual madness of nuclear tests conducted by the belligerent neighbours, India and Pakistan. But they overlook the more insidious daily war of attrition in the country they still naively believe is the world's largest democracy. They ignore the false divisions fomented by bigoted politicians between Hindus and Muslims, between haves and have-nots, between predators and preys. (Mumbai, the city where I passed my childhood years in blissful inter-communal harmony, became the scene since 1990 of deliberate, politically-fomented, communal hatred. Gujarat, the state that gave birth to Mahatma Gandhi became the *abattoir* for a programmed genocide just two years ago³. If the tell-tale symptoms of violent conflict, and their deliberate incitement by bigoted, self-interested politicians are not heeded now, this land that gave birth to Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi and the very concept of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) could drown in more blood than was witnessed in the violent partition that birthed the twin nations of India and Pakistan in 1947.)

Inequalities and marginalisation

Between April and August 2003, I spent much time in Afghanistan ravaged by over 20 years of war, and the first victim of the new 'war on terrorism'. 'Ethnic conflict again!' the experts would rush to confirm, as the population is 95 percent Muslim. Yet, the inequalities and marginalisation that fuelled the first communist-inspired struggle against a despotic and corrupt monarchy are forgotten. The devastation born by innocent Afghans as the USA and USSR fought out their Cold War and poured deadly weapons into Afghanistan is ignored. The internecine rivalries created between different tribes and factions vying for US and Pakistani military and financial support, the early support of both

countries for the Taliban, and for today's ruling warlords is overlooked.

In August-September 2003, I was in Guatemala, which emerged in 1996 from over 3 decades of civil war. 'Ideological war! Communists!' the experts would declare. In this predominantly Christian nation, witnessing a strong rise in fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity and a rediscovery of Mayan rituals, the conflict was not about religion or ethnicity, and not even simply about Communist ideology. It was about inequality and injustice. While the oppressed Mayan indigenous population and others suffering inequality resisted oppressive autocratic rule, the neighbouring hegemon, USA, trained and maintained successive military dictatorships and fuelled the repressive war in order to protect its economic interests. Just seven years later, several of Guatemala's military and political elite are again violating with impunity the peace agreements which are biting into their privileges.

In December 2003, I was in Uganda teaching a group of university professors hailing from the most conflict-ridden part of the world – the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa. (This is the region I worked in myself between 1999 and 2002, addressing conflicts, humanitarian crises and war economies as the Policy Coordinator and Africa Strategy Manager for a British humanitarian agency, Oxfam.) The professors represented countries that summarise all the stereotypes we have in the West about African conflicts. There was Sudan, the longest-standing conflict in Africa, now tremulously seeking peace. 'Religious conflict!' the experts would proclaim, 'between the Muslim North and the Christian and animist South'.

Yet the economic exploitation and resource conflicts, and historic patterns of marginalisation and oppression that underpinned the war are rarely mentioned. There were Rwanda and Burundi, respectively the sites of ethnic genocide and near-genocide, erupting from the structures of inequality and domination inherited from the Belgian colonisers. There was the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), whose war is fuelled by the greedy global scramble for its mineral wealth. And Uganda itself, the favourite of the international financial and donor community, but nonetheless home to several brutal conflicts.

'Rencontre' of Civilisations

Samuel Huntington⁴, an American writer, predicted a 'clash of civilisations' after the Cold War. The 11th of September was seen as proof of his thesis, of a world divided between incompatible civilisations and cultures. Historically, it was the '*brassage entre civilisations*' the marvelous

encounter between cultures and peoples that led to the greatest intellectual, artistic, scientific and political leaps in human evolution and innovation. In the past, the 'rencontre' of civilisations was celebrated. It was not seen as a clash that might be to one culture's detriment, but as a mutual enrichment and joyous celebration for both. One question arises. As Huntington's theory resurges, we must ask: "Could a real 'civilisation' that truly merits that name ever encourage a clash with another? Would it ever try to dominate another civilisation tacitly or overtly, or in any way claim political, moral or economic superiority?" When we think of the fear and anger that, for example, ethnocentric European politicians incite in their public by inventing an Armageddon⁵ of fundamentalist Islam, waves of refugees and immigrants – (who are only escaping wars and poverty caused by the global political economy) we must ask ourselves this. As certain powers seek to homogenise the world into one corporate vision of free market democracy, we must urgently ask this question.

Since 1990 and the end of the Cold War, we have contented ourselves with these facile theories of conflict based on the divisiveness of identity and ethnicity, of religion and civilisation. We have accepted the effective division of the very planet we live in and love into the peaceful, prosperous 'North' constituted of honest, hard-working, largely Christian and democratic citizens, and the warring, impoverished 'South' constituted of corrupt, lazy, Islamic, animist, heathen and only sometimes Christian anti-democratic subjects. This division serves a powerful political – and economic - purpose. This division of the world allows us to see the two parts of the world as distinct and hermetic, the former having no historic or current impact on the politics and economy of the latter. The South's problems, television viewers in the North are led to believe, are entirely their own creation. The pop thesis of American academic Francis Fukuyama⁶, that the end of the cold war marked the 'End of history' can be taken as a justification to dismiss any historic responsibility of the North for the current state of wars and deprivation in the South. The devastation of centuries of slavery, colonisation, wars of decolonisation, and the brutal Cold War fought out primarily in the South are all brushed under the carpet, although they are so recent and their legacy is ever-present.

Inequality between groups

So then let us get to the heart of the problem. What is really behind these pop theories of conflict? As we saw earlier, justice or rather injustice is one profound factor which tends to be overlooked in conflict.

One popular theory that comes close to this realisation claims that poverty and illiteracy cause conflict. In rich countries too, the poor ghettos where minorities and immigrants live are seen as dens of crime and violence, avoided even by the police. Now, poverty and illiteracy are seen not only to cause conflict and even genocide in distant lands like Rwanda and Afghanistan, but to cause terrorism in our own homes as well. However, this poverty thesis misses the crucial point and is both erroneous and dangerous.

Systematic economic studies have shown that it is not poverty per se but *inequality between groups* that is a common factor underlying conflict. When a particular group in society is deliberately marginalised and excluded from a fair share of economic, political and cultural resources, a grievance is created that could be mobilised – or manipulated - to provoke conflict. This mobilisation could be along the lines of group identity based on race, religion, class, ideology or any other factor. In almost all cases, such conflict only occurs when the marginalised group feels it has exhausted all legal options within the political system to achieve an improvement in their situation. Former *guerrilleros* in El Salvador and Guatemala who fought oppression attest that if they had had any alternative to weapons, they would have chosen it. However, what is often overlooked is that more often conflicts are caused not by the oppressed, but by the political and economic elites who violently resist any change to the status quo, and any fair redistribution of assets and power. Apartheid South Africa on the one hand, and on the other, the ethnocentric politics of Le Pen (France) and Haider (Austria) based on fomented hatred of immigrants are prime examples.

First address the injustices

We do address the sensational side of injustice in wars: genocide, war crimes, rapes of women. These injustices are the *consequences* of conflict, and must be addressed. But we must also and first address the injustices that were the original causes of conflict and preceded it: the profound systemic and structural injustices between groups in society. We must learn to identify the tell-tale symptoms of injustice – the flare-ups of violence based on deep grievance, the lack of recourse to legal remedy, the impunity of perpetrators - which, if addressed in time, could prevent all-out violence.

The key factor in most conflicts is a combination of 'grievance' and 'greed'. That is, when you have unaddressed social grievances based on systemic injustices and inequalities, together with self-interested politicians and individuals

who seize the opportunity to manipulate feelings of grievance for their personal benefit, violence can result. These politicians or individuals use two simple mechanisms to foment violence and conflict, whether it be genocidal violence in Rwanda or India, or whether it be simply ethnocentric scapegoating as in France, Austria, Denmark and elsewhere. These two simple mechanisms are: *fear* and *greed*. And first is the appeal to fear, which is carefully manufactured. If you are a minority, you are told: "If you do not fight for your rights as an oppressed group, you will be exterminated." If you are a majority group, you are told: "If you do not fight to maintain the status quo, and your privileges, you will become unemployed like those immigrants, poor like those Blacks, or marginalised like those Muslims."

The second is the appeal to self-interest or greed: "You and your children will be better off if those awful people stealing our jobs, our children's places in school, and dirtying our clean neighbourhoods were not around." Or more directly, "You could benefit from fighting and riots. You could sell more arms, you could loot more houses, you could rape more women, you could extort protection money from your clients."

In both cases, fear and greed work very effectively, and earnest citizens fall in line and support or tolerate conflict and violence in what they believe is their best personal and national interest.

If we did not have structural and systemic injustices, if we addressed these symptoms and causes well in time, we would not create situations where these grievances would be manipulated, with all the terrible consequences of conflict. But if we did not have those self-interested politicians and self-styled warmongers who see their individual gain in manipulating such situations, they would not lead to violent conflict. In India, we saw innumerable symptoms of communal violence since 1947. Only their consequences were addressed nominally through the establishment of commissions of enquiry, although their reports were rarely followed-up and perpetrators often went un-punished. However, the deeper causes lying in social and structural injustice were never remedied, until today we have a near-genocidal situation in a land famed for non-violence. If we are willing in India to tolerate and condone what in effect amounts to apartheid, and, moreover, to claim that it is the Hindu religion which requires such bigoted violent behaviour, where will this lead? When religions and spirituality itself are contorted to suit the aims of a handful of manipulative politicians and their coteries, what can we expect but division and violence?

Shared humanity

Let me return now to Uganda where we were talking about peace and justice in a context of war and injustice. One concept kept coming back to us over and over again. It is the South African concept of '*UBUNTU*' or shared humanity. This concept underpinned the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, led by co-chairman Bishop Desmond Tutu. Quite simply, *ubuntu* means common or shared humanity: 'I exist because you exist. Without you I fail to exist.' As we probed deeper, we realised that this was not just a South African concept, but a concept that existed in every single African country, culture, tribe in the continent. While Africa is seen by the world as a continent awash with conflict, every tiny tribe and culture in Africa enshrines and practices the notion of shared humanity.

As I travelled back to Europe from Uganda, and then onwards to the World Social Forum in Mumbai, I was struck repetitively by the realisation that *Ubuntu* or shared humanity is not an African concept at all, but a universal one. Indeed, it is *the* most universal and timeless concept that is enshrined in every spiritual and religious tradition, in every culture and civilisation. Through the ages, every Prophet, every enlightened being has brought to us only one truth: we are one, we are all connected, we all share in a single collective consciousness. Whichever language, whichever script, whichever voice they used to articulate it, each Prophet and Seer brought us the single message that beyond the dualities and divisiveness that dictate our daily lives, is infinite unity. And the simple glue that binds us all together is universal love.

Yet, tragically, ironically, paradoxically, every religion took the foundational message of unity and contorted it into division. Each religion said to its devotees, '*You* and no one else are the chosen ones. You are superior. Our truth is more true than their truth!' Religions preached and even condoned fear and hatred of the other: 'If you cannot convert, destroy and kill'. Tragically, through the ages, our politics, our society, our economy reinforced this duality and divisiveness. And again the same two mechanisms were used to do so: fear and greed. Every spirituality and religion emphasises the central necessity to be humble, to overcome and dissolve the individual ego in pursuit of equality and common humanity or oneness – Jesus Christ, Buddha, the Prophet Mohammed or Sufi and Hindu seers. Yet, all of our religious, economic and political systems are based on feeding the individual ego through constant appeals to fear and greed. This is why our identities and religions have

become sources of conflict and division rather than the sources of unity and common humanity that they were destined to be.

Is this inevitable? Unfortunately, I believe that conflict and violence will be with us as long as we allow our egos to be fed and to listen to the messages of fear and greed. Whether it is violent conflict of the Rwanda kind or the Gujarat kind; whether it is terrorism of the Palestinian kind or the 11th of September kind; whether it is ethnocentric hatred of the Le Pen kind, all these feed on fear and greed, which fuel the self-interest of the ego.

But this is not ineluctable. I do believe that each one of us can return to that source of common humanity, that oneness that transcends the dualities and divisions of our daily lives. By simply being open

and listening to our own inner voice rather than the insidious and tempting voiceovers of our corrupted politics and society, we can resist the appeals to our egos and act based on the calling of our souls and hearts.

In closing let us muse on the words of the 14th century Persian Sufi poet Hafiz:

*I have learned
so much from God
that I can no longer
call myself
a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a
Buddhist, a Jew.
The truth has shed so much of itself
with me
That I can no longer call myself*

*A man, a woman, an angel, or even
pure soul.*

*Love has befriended Hafiz so
completely,
it has turned to ash
and freed me
of every concept and image
my mind has ever known.⁷*

Let us heed Hafiz and free our minds of the preconceived notions of division and difference handed down to us. Let us free our minds and open our hearts to the only reality that is as timeless as it is real: that we all share one common humanity, one collective consciousness. Let us celebrate this, in peace.

¹ The summary of this workshop is available at the Centre Lebet.

² The Sri Lankan population is composed of the Sinhallas (74%), the Tamils (17%) and the Muslims (7.1%).

³ In February 2002, violent confrontations between extremist Hindus and Muslims killed hundreds in Gujarat, a north-eastern state in India.

⁴ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilisations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone Books, NY, 1997.

⁵ A war provoking great disasters leading to the end of the world.

⁶ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Penguin, 1992.

⁷ Hafiz, *The Gift*, translated by Daniel Landinsky, Penguin, 1999, p. 32.

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