

Editorial: Rediscovering Virtue

By M. Ali Lakhani

Virtue is to worship God as if you see Him, and if you see Him not, surely He sees you!

(Hadith of Gabriel)

How can we inspire people to reach beyond rampant materialism, self-indulgent individualism, and unprincipled relativism? One answer is to augment our focus on personal prerogatives and individual rights, with an expanded concern for personal responsibilities and communal goals. A passion for justice, the quest for equality, a respect for tolerance, a dedication to human dignity—these are universal human values which are broadly shared across divisions of class, race, language, faith and geography. They constitute what classical philosophers—in the East and West alike—have described as human ‘virtue’—not merely the absence of negative restraints on individual freedom, but also a set of positive responsibilities, moral disciplines which prevent liberty from turning into license.

(His Highness the Aga Khan— Speech to the School of International and Public Affairs, Columbia University, 2006)

There is a link between faith and ethics that lies at the core of human nature and is of the very essence of virtue. The consequence of severing that divine knot with the sharp blade of reductive materialism (either by reifying the world or deifying the self) is evident in the Karamazovian dictum: “If God is dead, then everything is permitted”. The result is seen in the modernist erosion of societal values with its licentious eclipsing of guilt and shame, and in the increasingly relativistic privatization of morality—in short, in the decline of virtue as a human norm.

While postmodern critiques of society have proven valuable in deconstructing normative tendencies to homogenize moral behavior, they have overshot their mark by failing to recognize the legitimate normative content of virtue. In large measure this is because of their radical skepticism towards faith, both as foundational dogma (through denying the

axiomatic nature of metaphysical ‘first principles’) and as the substance of normative virtue. Towards the end of his life, the doyen of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida, equated deconstruction with justice, thereby hinting at its principal foundations while at the same time igniting a controversy among some of his followers who alleged that he had abandoned his own principles which would have required him to deconstruct ‘justice’ itself. The point is that, notwithstanding such radical skepticism, ethics must rest on spiritual foundations—on faith—or else it loses its moorings.

By faith we mean the intellectual apprehension of reality as Absolute, as both transcendent and immanent, with its consequent manifold implications: the epistemological implications of objectivity rooted in the fusion of knowing and being in the supra-rational Intellect (the “Eye of the Heart”), and of certainty in the Primordial Nature; the cosmological implications of the Center and the periphery, and of the principle of verticality; the ethical implications of our participation in the community of the ever-renewing theophany, and of Man’s obligations of humility and fiduciary responsibility in consequence of his creature-hood and his theomorphic nature; the aesthetic implications of the Sacred in view of the effulgence of the Absolute as both Infinite and Perfect, and therefore sublime and beautiful; and the teleological implications of our return to our Origin and End.

Without faith and the principal integrity of a universal conscience rooted in our Primordial Nature, human beings are left to construct private moralities subject only to individual whims and societal restraints. And when societal restraints cede their conscience to power, whether of the *zeitgeist* or of self-interest, this will inevitably cause the moral fabric of society and of the personal conscience to fray. While it may sound fanciful to suggest that the result of this may be a re-enacting in our lifetimes of the allegorical dystopia of the “Lord of the Flies”, we may not be too far from this outcome—indeed, some would say we have already arrived there—in an age dominated by unbridled personal freedoms and by a culture of fashion-driven values.

The situation is not aided by the decline of religion in our times. Recent surveys have confirmed that there is a growing disaffection, particularly among the youth, towards organized religion. This trend is noticeable across the board in the case of all the major faith traditions, particularly in the West, and is accompanied by certain categorical con-

flations between ‘religion’ and terms such as ‘politics’ or ‘culture’. Is the suicide bomber who kills and maims in the name of religion representative of true religion or of its counterfeit? To what extent are conflicts between religious ethnicities in places like the Occupied Territories in the Middle East, Iraq, Kashmir, Egypt, Sri Lanka, the Western Balkans, Northern Ireland, Burma, or Sudan, truly rooted in religion rather than in politics and political exploitations of religion? Communitarian strife in the name of religion often has deep roots in political repression and economic injustices. To what extent is the ‘hijab’, or the mistreatment of women by certain religious groups, indicative of religious rather than cultural norms? Cultural norms can easily be conflated with religious laws, and there are diverse practices and interpretations of religious laws within any given religion. Confusions about these kinds of issues, and abuses of religion in the name of religion, have fueled discontent with religion, both within and among religions, leading to secularist and fundamentalist expressions of disaffection, and also to a search for alternative forms of spirituality.

Globalism too has brought about trends in the directions of both atomization and homogenization, manifesting, in Benjamin Barber’s terminology, in a conflict between the domains of “Jihad” and “McWorld”. Secularist reactions to religion have been spurred by religious dogmatism, and vice versa. For example, the 9/11 attacks prompted Richard Dawkins to vilify religion as “a ready-made system of mind control which has been honed over centuries” and to repeatedly castigate religion by simplistically equating it with its abuses and misdeeds. So too the ‘hard secularism’ found in the policies of certain European countries or in Quebec’s proposed Secular Charter are indicative of reactionary trends that would locate security in outward identity rather than in perennial and universal principles of pluralism. This approach is based on the fallacy of normativist reductionism, as misguided as the fundamentalist urges of the Taliban, who, like their secularist counterparts, ignore the spiritual roots of tolerance.

It is simply wrong-headed to imagine that one can do away with faith or religiosity in life, much as some secularists would wish. One indication of this is that many among the disaffected, seeking to affirm their innate religiosity but despondent about formal religion, prefer to describe themselves as ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’, and are finding

inspiration through alternative modes of spirituality located outside organized religion, in private cults, with self-help groups and self-styled ‘gurus’, and popular forms of ‘New Age’ spirituality. While these alternative expressions may appear benign, they can often encourage undisciplined personal experimentation and cultish behavior that is dangerous. In their own way, these pseudo-religions are parodies of authentic faith traditions, and though they have compensatory value, they are frequently awash in sentimentality and lacking in doctrinal and sacramental coherence and rigor to be of deep value.

Confronted with this landscape of the decline of faith in modern society, it is apt to ask “how can we inspire people to reach beyond rampant materialism, self-indulgent individualism, and unprincipled relativism?” The language of religion is itself burdened with a baggage that limits its appeal. Words like ‘religion’ (which etymologically implies a ‘binding’), ‘tradition’ (etymologically, a ‘handing over’), and ‘orthodoxy’ (etymologically, ‘right thinking’) have acquired corrosive meanings and create ‘word allergies’ in certain quarters. What is required is a broader basis of appeal that can link faith to ethics in order to ground our endeavors in the modern world.

One approach, which is being adopted by His Highness the Aga Khan, the Imam or spiritual leader of the world’s 14 million Shi’a Isma’ili Muslims, is to use the language of ‘civil society’ and ‘public integrity’, of ‘pluralism’ and a ‘cosmopolitan ethic’, grounded in “universal human values which are broadly shared across divisions of class, race, language, faith and geography”. He speaks of the need for cultivating “moral disciplines” whose impetus is “an expanded concern for personal responsibilities and communal goals” which derive from the integral connectedness of faith (*din*) and worldly life (*duniya*). As he states in another part of his Columbia University address quoted above, “One cannot talk about integrity without also talking about faith.” This is because integrity implies wholeness, an intrinsic sense of connectedness, a fuller engagement with life and not a rejection of it. He therefore speaks of the need for a renewed commitment to our spiritual traditions, and of the dangerous consequences of the loss of faith in the modern world, noting:

“To be sure, religious freedom is a critical value in a pluralistic society. But if freedom of religion deteriorates into freedom from religion—then I fear we will soon be lost on a bleak and barren landscape—with no compass or roadmap, no sense of ultimate direction.”

The moral compass that the Aga Khan advocates is based on a pluralistic engagement that roots virtue in faith and community. Balancing a liberal “focus on personal prerogatives and individual rights” with a conservative emphasis on “an expanded concern for personal responsibilities and communal goals” (Columbia University, 2006), he calls for the cultivation of “an ethical sensibility that can be shared across denominational lines and can foster a universal moral outlook” (Evora Symposium, 2006). This ethical sensibility is intrinsic to human nature, and must be discovered afresh and renewed to counter the deleterious effects of moral erosion in our times.

From the standpoint of ‘Tradition’, ‘virtue’ is inherent in the very nature of Man and represents his true spiritual potential. Faith, one may say, is the receptivity and predisposition of Man to this potential, which is symbolized by Adam Kadmon, the prototype of perfection—*al-insan al-kamil*—who is the *imago Dei*, or the embodiment of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. ‘Virtue’ (*jen* in Chinese theosophy), therefore, is more than a set of rules or a prescribed code of civilized behavior (*li*). Moral action must derive from our innate nature, the intrinsic humanness which constitutes true virtue. It involves an inward reaching into our integral core for a connection with the ‘Other’ that is expressed through a commitment to justice and a respect for the Sacred and for human dignity. In Confucian terms, “To master and control the self and return to *li*, that is *jen*.” (*Analects* 12.1)

The core of virtue is not external. It is the inner dimension of moral behavior, rooted in our spiritual nature. This internalization that we term ‘virtue’ is the adhesion of the will to the Intellect, and to the Goodness that is its substance. This adhesion cannot be coerced, nor is it rooted in the dogmatism of the mind. It derives rather from our Heart or moral center, our spiritual conscience which is a gift from the Divine, and which in the end connects faith and ethics. And so, in his Columbia University address, The Aga Khan concludes with a reminder of the fundamental importance of locating public integrity and creative pluralism in metaphysical norms:

“Let me finally emphasize my strong conviction that public integrity cannot grow out of authoritarian pronouncements. It must be rooted in the human heart and conscience. As the Holy Qur’an says: “*There is no compulsion in religion*”. The resurgence of spirituality—potentially such a positive force—can become a negative influence when

it turns into self-righteousness and imposes itself on others. Like all of the world's great religions, Islam warns against the danger of comparing oneself with God, and places primary emphasis on the qualities of generosity, mercy and humility.

A central element in any religious outlook, it seems to me, is a sense of human limitation, a recognition of our own creature-hood—a posture of profound humility before the Divine. In that sensibility lies our best protection against divisive dogmatism and our best hope for creative pluralism.”

“A posture of profound humility before the Divine”—this is the foundation of virtue. It is by recognizing our creature-hood and affirming our spiritual potential that we can hope to balance our prerogatives and responsibilities in the world, and to attain thereby to the inward peace that reflects as outward order. In Islamic terms, Man is *khalifa* (master) by virtue of his submission to his status as ‘*abd*’ (servant). And in Christian terms, it is by virtue of our obligations to God that we have obligations to our ‘neighbor’. It is when Man arrogates powers to himself, denying his creature-hood and forgetting his rank, that he abrogates his responsibilities, losing his integrity, thereby upsetting the Order and Equilibrium of life:

“Take but degree away, untune that string,
And, hark, what discord follows!”
(Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida*)

And so, it is through the wisdom of humility that we must finally seek to rebuild our lives, fastening the link between faith and virtue, and serving our Creator with the gifts He has bestowed on us. In the words of T. S. Eliot from ‘*East Coker*’,

“The only wisdom we can hope to acquire
Is the wisdom of humility: humility is endless.”