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Avoiding a clash of fundamentalisms

Soon after United States President Barack Obama personally announced that US Special Forces have killed Osama bin Laden, Americans exploded in triumphant patriotic celebrations. They gathered in public places rhythmically chanting “U-S-A! U-S-A!” No doubt, they saw the killing of the world’s most wanted person as a major victory in the US-led war against terrorism. But, if Bin Laden portrayed himself as the face of militant Islam, what image does America effectively project when it goes into frenzied celebration like this?

This kind of jubilation stands in contrast to the restrained and measured tone in which Obama couched his brief remarks. The death of Bin Laden in the hands of American troops is a huge achievement of his presidency. His political stock is certain to rise after this. But he would have been aware of the sensitivities that could be activated by this event in the rest of the world, particularly among Muslims. He consciously dissociated Bin Laden from Islam, and argued that this criminal was indeed an enemy of Islam. He spoke about justice being done without sounding as if this was all about satisfying a thirst for vengeance.

For vengeance begets vengeance. Which is why those who rejoice over the killing of Bin Laden have prepared for retaliation. They know they have killed a man but not what he represents. In death, Bin Laden could be more lethal than when he was alive. His “martyrdom” could spawn new terror cells that form a global movement not so much in the sense that they are organizationally linked as that they are unified by their emulation of one man’s crusade.

This is, of course, not to say he should not have been hunted down

or killed. It is simply to point out that the handling of his corpse, the announcement of his death, and the management of the public response are as delicate as the planning of his assassination. Bin Laden was not a politician like Saddam Hussein or Moammar Gadhafi, and al-Qaida is not a country but a worldview.

In his book, "The future of human nature," Jurgen Habermas argues that the so-called war on terror is not a war. "(W)hat comes to be expressed in terrorism is also the fatally speechless clash of worlds, which have to work out a common language, beyond the mute violence of terrorists or missiles."

Fundamentalism is certainly not a monopoly of Islam or of the non-Western world. Various orthodoxies are to be found in Christianity and Judaism, as well as in Western society. The only way to avoid a clash of civilizations, says Habermas, is by reflecting upon the way the process of secularization unfolded in the modern West itself. Here, despite the length of time it has taken, secularization is far from complete. But, its most vital fruit is that religion is no longer wedded to politics, nor does it take up arms to pursue its aims.

This is not the case in other societies, where religious cultures have had a hard time adjusting to the rapidly changing circumstances of a globally-induced modernity. Here, people often see modernity as the advent of Satan himself. They equate modernity with unbridled decadence, excessive materialism, and loss of moral bearings in every sphere of life. In a world of unregulated markets, where worldly goods and pleasures take first priority, it is not difficult to see why people tend to regard modernity as Satan's playground. Habermas writes: "Only if we realize what secularization means in our own post-secular societies can we be far-sighted in our response to the risks involved in a secularization miscarrying in other parts of the world." The West should avoid being perceived, he counsels, "as crusaders of a competing religion or as salespeople of instrumental reason and destructive secularization."

Those who triumphantly raise the secular banner of American nationalism as an instinctive response to the killing of Bin Laden are falling into the same fundamentalist mindset that has guided the violence of the al-Qaida. They fail to see the trauma that global modernity and its principal champion, the United States, have inflicted upon traditional societies. This is not just about pre-modern cultures acting irrationally in a world they can no longer grasp. This is, more than anything else, a narrative of the humiliation, oppression, and exploitation of entire peoples caught up in an arrogant secular world which has stripped them of their subjectivity.

We who live and thrive in such a world like to counsel faith communities to engage in self-reflection that may awaken them to the realities of a modern pluralist society. We want them to see that the religious experience takes many forms, that they have no choice but to recognize the authority of science, and that they must respect the secular premises of a constitutional state. But, secularism too can gain from self-reflection. It may realize how difficult and ultimately futile it is to try to erase “the force of articulation inherent in religious languages” in the quest for universal acceptability.

Consider the ongoing debate on contraception. Let us take an insight from a reflective agnostic like Habermas: “Democratic commonsense is not singular; it describes the mental state of a many-voiced public. Secular majorities must not reach decisions in such questions before the objections of opponents who feel that these decisions violate their beliefs have been heard; they have to consider these objections as a kind of dilatory plea in order to examine what may be learned from them.”

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