
Panelist's Remarks

Azim A. Nanji

I am going to start with two words: "global values," and then, as a good student of religion, do an exegesis of those two words.

We are heirs to dichotomies. Perhaps this story, which comes out of Asia, may enable us to frame these dichotomies. It is about three wise persons who used to sit on a bench each evening and talk about the problems of the world. One evening they happened to be sitting on the bench as the light was fading, opposite a lamp post. They saw a woman searching for something she had apparently lost. After a while she left, not having found what she was looking for. She came back and again looked unsuccessfully. As she was departing, they decided that perhaps they could help, so they went to her and said, "Can we help you? Have you lost something?"

"I have lost an earring," she said.

"Fine," they said. "We will help you look for it. Where should we look?"

"I don't know," she replied.

"Well, you have been looking here under the lamp," they responded.

"Oh," she said. "That's because there is light here."

The dichotomies we inherit have to do with the "lamps" under which we look. The discussions of yesterday and today have suggested that all of us look under many different lamps, and consequently, are products of different formations, both culturally and also educationally. The specializations within our education system, particularly at the level of higher education,

engender a narrow focus which we are required to develop because of the subjects we specialize in and the dichotomies that we live by. We study the world with the help of the lamp by which we have been taught. That process creates the differences of opinion, perspectives, and so on, that we have heard—particularly in the selection on biotechnology, which I thought was an excellent illustration of discussing a global issue under two totally different lamps.

We have also, over time, because of the different religious and cultural traditions that we belong to, very often developed closed communities of interpretation. One of the things that our contemporary condition has dramatically changed is that, in the words of Martin Marty, the historian of religion in America, the modern condition has hurled us against each other so that the particular interpretations of spirituality, ethics, or the religious tradition we have inherited, are brought into contact with each other. This encounter has, from time to time, also generated conflict. Often, during more friendly encounters, we simply end up telling each other about our ethical values, our spiritual traditions, and the great truths we have inherited in our scriptures, thereby producing monologues. Such encounters do not result in an approach to ethics and values that is global. For a global approach we all need to respect each others' pluralism and diversity and, at the same time, transcend some of that pluralism and some of that diversity to address common problems and

issues which require a language of convergence, not the languages of divergence that we have inherited.

One of the interesting things about this story is that it points to the tremendous wealth that we have inherited, even though we may have looked under different lamps, because something has been illuminated for us. Something has become focused, which we have made our own, and which we have integrated into our lives.

I grew up as a child on the coast of East Africa, in the city of Mombasa, sometimes in Nairobi. Mombasa was a very cosmopolitan port city. It was like many cities that face oceans—it did not look simply inwards, it looked out to the world that lay beyond the ocean. So we inherited a sense of cosmopolitanism and a tradition that allowed us to be not only bilingual, but trilingual. Again, as in the biotechnology seminar, we can be bilingual, we can understand biotechnology both in its scientific and ethical modes, and we can still be talking at cross-purposes—speaking the language is not a solution in itself. A new kind of language is not the solution, because it cannot be developed over a short period of time. In fact, in the 7,000 or 8,000 years of history, of formulating traditions, we have not been able to develop it. So perhaps, like biodiversity, we need to look at ourselves in the mirror and acknowledge the dichotomies and address our differences. If we accept the fact that we start with difference, perhaps we can take the steps that follow afterward.

A lot of my practical experience is outside the field of religious studies, the discipline in which I am trained. If you will permit me, I will indulge in some self-criticism. Many observers point to a revival of religion and its intrusion into public space. Last Sunday, here in Washington, there was a gathering of Christian activists called the Promise Keepers. In the news we hear constantly of Islamic fundamentalism. We hear of difficulties in the Middle East, both on the Jewish and Muslim sides as well as on the Christian side. We hear of the revival of religious expressions in politics in India. We have already seen in Sri Lanka the difficulties caused by divisions across ethnic and religious lines. And there is, of course, the example of Northern Ireland.

There appears to be nowhere in the world where religious traditions have not been in conflict with each other or within themselves in expressing their vision, and we are again left to deal with a tremendous amount of difference and diversity within religion.

Our approach to these issues, unfortunately, is severely handicapped. Allow me to point to one area that I think should be of particular concern to us. That is the way in which the humanities in general, and culture and religion specifically, have been taught. I am going to use the example of universities in this country and how the teaching of the humanities has gradually eroded in quality over time.

There was a statistical analysis done of humanities requirements that were imposed on students who went through their undergraduate lives. It was very clear from statistical computation that more and more students are desirous of going into professional schools. They want to go into law, medicine, and so on; taking the minimum required humanities courses necessary.

What this has done in their academic lives is that it has erased the possibility that they will become more than superficially aware of the ethical, cultural, spiritual, and religious values of humanity. It is that lack of knowledge and understanding that they can then transfer to their professional working lives because most of their subsequent years are going to be spent in specializing in a field like economics, law, or medicine. Hence, when we complain about the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund, or all of the great social science agencies and international companies which are engaged in global activity, the people who work there, the people who are educated to work there have not had the opportunity to study under "different lamps."

It is not their fault in some sense that they should discount from their discussion on global affairs questions of ethics and values, because it makes them uncomfortable to have to deal with things they do not know. There is no context within which they can frame the issues in ethical terms. Therefore, one of the realities I think we have to accept, if we are going to create this sort of convergence about global values, is to begin to put together models, in our own exist-

ing educational structures all over the world, that allow us to begin this process much earlier.

I want to talk about one program in which I have been involved and which seems to me to offer some hope. It would be naive for me say that many public education programs, state-run education programs in the developing world, are successful. Unfortunately, they are not, for lack of resources and many other reasons. In East Africa this perception led communities at the grassroots level to address this problem at the most fundamental level by providing access to education and by encouraging people to promote education at the youngest age.

It was felt important to provide an integrated educational experience. To use the word "holistic" would perhaps be one way of expressing it. It was important for children in that environment to master the languages that they would need as they grew up. It was important that they understood their own cultural heritage and modernity.

Now, how do you translate all of this to children ranging from three to five years in age. It is an astonishing thing that three-year-olds, with the right teaching methods, will develop a sense of commitment, a sense of values, and a sense of understanding ethics if it is taught in a non-parochial, cosmopolitan, and child-centered manner.

This is a small program. We started with about eight schools, which were in traditional settings called madrasas. Islamic education has a very rich history, and it was important to convince communities that as the Prophet said, one should pursue knowledge, even if one had to go to China. The Prophet was not disparaging China. He was saying that you have to pursue the best knowledge wherever it exists. One of the things we did, in fact, was to use this as a tool for enabling students to pursue other kinds of subjects that perhaps the more traditional-minded would have said they should not pursue within a traditional setting.

Two years ago I was asked to speak at the Stanford University commencement to give the baccalaureate. Now, I knew they had been through a rough year fighting over their curriculum and its goals of diversity. Here, a quality higher education institution in America was facing a question of pedagogy, similar in

dimension to the one facing young children in East Africa, at a time of dramatic change. There were diverse, strongly held opinions. One wanted a sort of smorgasbord of courses that would allow for all kinds of diversity. Then there were those who argued for a traditional core reflecting a classical vision of Western civilization.

Though my mandate was not to offer a resolution, I felt it important to remind the graduating students that their institution was called a "university." It did not mean that diversity was not important. But a thousand years of tradition in that university suggested ways in which they could develop skills that would enable them to see knowledge as a whole, not in dissected, dichotomized units or fragments. And if they were not able to do that in a university, that they would simply leave as people who had studied under individual lamps without having seen what other kinds of knowledge existed which might illuminate further their own life experiences.

It had struck me as I observed the architecture of Stanford, and more particularly the courtyard and hall across the Memorial Chapel where the students had gathered, that it is frontier architecture—it integrated the values that came from Spain, but adapted them to a new world. The values of Spain were influenced by the long presence of the world of Islam. All of these patterns and the products of their encounters reappear in a newly imagined and creative forms on the American frontier. It is a way of integrating experience. And I felt it was important to remind them that even the architecture of the university represented a way for them to integrate language visually.

One of the stories I ended with then, and which I will end with today, comes out of Islamic tradition. It is a classic of spirituality called the *Conference of the Birds* and has been translated into many languages. It starts with a gathering like ours, a congregation, if perhaps I might use the word.

Birds from all over the world had come together to pose questions. What makes us birds, what is it that makes us one? What is it that is in common? How do we go about finding out what it is that we have in common? In some sense, what is it that makes us human beings,

and what is it that will sustain us as human beings in the world in which we live?

The birds discuss and argue. Some of them lack commitment. They have their business and immediate needs. They prefer not to get involved in the task. Others decide that they will undertake the task, and they leave under a leader to pursue their quest. The quest ends with 30 survivors who, having crossed many valleys and mountains, arrive at a place where they think that the truth will be revealed to them. They sit, waiting for it to descend like some sound byte. Perhaps that may be the expectation that some of us have, that at the end of the conference a sound byte will sum up what we said and will provide us with the magic solution.

The birds wait and nothing happens. They engage in silent, contemplative meditation. At the end of the moment they look around, and the experience of knowledge and convergence is suddenly apparent to them.

The poet who wrote this work plays on two Persian words. The word for "30" in Faros is *si*. The word for birds is *murgh*. The truth they have been looking for is symbolized by the entity *si-murgh*. And as they look at themselves, they realize that they have indeed found the *si-murgh*. It is not some entity out there waiting to be discovered. It is their collective experience of wholeness and oneness that has made them aware of what human destiny truly can be.