

even now. Is it not possible to build, on that shared linguistic foundation, creative cultural programmes that will link the two communities ? Our universities, schools, artists, musicians and the media have much to contribute in this area.

Finally, several of the resource persons and many of the participants here are involved in programmes on the ground that directly answer the question posed: "What is to be done?" We are all familiar with some of the admirable work that Dr. Hasbulla, Moulavi Suffian and many others are engaged in. I have not attempted to stretch the areas in which useful

programmes could be founded but, rather, have sought to address the strategic aspects of, broadly, Tamil-Muslim and, more specifically, LTTE- Muslim relations. Strengthening these relationships is a prerequisite to reaching the essential goal of doing justice to the Muslim victims of Black October 1990.

I end with one proposal for immediate attention - some of these issues need to be taken up in Geneva in April. I think they can be gainfully pursued. ■

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ATHEISM IS A LEGACY WORTH FIGHTING FOR

Slavoj Zizek

For centuries, we have been told that without religion we are no more than egotistic animals fighting for our share, our only morality that of a pack of wolves; only religion, it is said, can elevate us to a higher spiritual level. Today, when religion is emerging as the wellspring of murderous violence around the world, assurance that Christian or Muslim or Hindu fundamentalists are only abusing and perverting the noble spiritual messages of their creeds ring increasingly hollow. What about restoring the dignity of atheism, one of Europe's greatest legacies and perhaps our only chance for peace?

More than a century ago, in *The Brothers Karamazov* and other works, Dostoyevsky warned against the dangers of godless moral nihilism, arguing in essence that if God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted. The French philosopher André Glucksmann even applied Dostoyevsky's critique of godless nihilism to 9/11, as the title of his book, "Dostoyevsky in Manhattan," suggests.

This argument couldn't have been more wrong: The lesson of today's terrorism is that if God exists, then everything, including blowing up thousands of innocent bystanders, is permitted—at least to those who claim to act directly on behalf of God, since, clearly, a direct link to God justifies the violation of any merely human constraints and considerations. In short fundamentalists have become no different than the "godless" Stalinist Communist, to whom everything was permitted, since they perceived themselves as direct instruments of their divinity, the Historical Necessity of Progress Toward Communism.

Fundamentalists do what they perceive as good deeds in order to fulfill God's will and to earn salvation; atheists do them simply because it is the right thing to do. Is this also not our most elementary experience of morality? When I do a good deed, I do so not with an eye toward gaining God's favor; I do so it because if I did not, I could not look at myself in the mirror. A moral deed is by definition its own reward. David Hume made this point poignantly when he wrote that the only way to show true respect for God is to act morally while ignoring God's existence.

Two years ago, Europeans were debating whether the preamble of the European Constitution should mention Christianity. As usual, a compromise was worked out, a reference in general terms to the "religious inheritance" of Europe. But where was modern Europe's most precious legacy, that of atheism? What makes modern Europe unique is that it is the first and only civilization in which atheism is a fully legitimate option, not an obstacle to any public post.

Atheism is a European legacy worth fighting for, not least because it creates a safe public space for believers. Consider the debate that raged in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia, my home country, as the constitutional controversy simmered: should Muslims (mostly immigrant workers from the old Yugoslav republic) be allowed to build a mosque? While conservatives opposed the mosque for cultural, political and even architectural reasons, the liberal weekly journal *Mladina* was consistently outspoken in its support for the mosque, in keeping with its concern for the rights of those from other former Yugoslav republics.

Not surprisingly, given its liberal attitudes, *Mladina* was also one of the few Slovenian publications to reprint the caricatures of Muhammad. And, conversely, those who displayed the greatest “understanding” for the violent Muslim protests those cartoons caused were also the ones who regularly expressed their concern for the fate of Christianity in Europe.

These weird alliances confront Europe’s Muslims with a difficult choice: The only political force that does not reduce them to second-class citizens and allows them the space to express their religious identity are the “godless” atheist liberals, while those closest to their religious social practice, their Christian mirror-image, are their greatest political enemies.

The paradox is that Muslims’ only real allies are not those who first published the caricatures for shock value, but those

who, in support of the ideal of freedom of expression, reprinted them.

While a true atheist has no need to bolster his own stance by provoking believers with blasphemy, he also refuses to reduce the problem of the Muhammad caricatures to one of the respect for others’ beliefs. Respect for others’ beliefs as the highest, value can mean only one of two things: Either we treat the other in a patronizing way and avoid hurting him in order not to ruin his illusions, or we adopt the relativist stance of multiple “regimes of truth,” disqualifying as violent imposition any clear insistence on truth. What about submitting Islam – together with all other religions – to a respectful, but for that reason no less ruthless, critical analysis? This, and only this, is the way to show a true respect for Muslims: to treat them as adults responsible for their beliefs. ■

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MEMORIES OF DETENTION

We sit in a room,
before the curfew,
and watch the road,
there is silence everywhere

There is a knock
on the weathered door,
and I meet the gaze of
my former acquaintance,
smile the warm welcome of
acceptance

We share a cup of tea,
and talk of the times,
gazing at photographs of
violence and counter-violence,
in that long and deserted
road.

Can this be possible?
I query.
All this violence,
on both sides,
one acquaintance more prone to violence,
abducted in a marketplace
after months of negotiation.

The silence of death
meets my gaze,
torpid in the festering
heat,
where were those trees,
totem poles of silence
to which the burnt out
remains of a man were
tethered?

I do not know?
I witness only the silent
suffering of one
who is trapped in a
world of death.

And what of my acquaintance?
The cups of coffee or tea we
shared at the canteen,
watching the canopied trees
and gurgling brook outside
the canteen are memories
distilled from the past.

I glance once more at the
distant hills and observe
images from the past.

Parvathi Solomons Arasanayagam