CHANDRA MUZAFFAR, RELIGION & THE DEFENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Have Australians become complacent about the values which stand as the backbone to our political traditions? Do we remember why we are a liberal democracy, and why being a liberal democracy is such a good manner of polis to be? There are many citizens and commentators in Australia today who share the concern that in our political treatment of many outsiders, and indeed, some of ‘us’ over recent years, we have lost the memory of some ideas without which our identity as a liberal democracy becomes hollow and hypocritical. Think of the plight of Indigenous Australians; our treatment of asylum seekers — even where claims to asylum might be legitimately rejected; our selfishness with regard to East Timor’s oil fields and thus the flegling nation’s economic future; the manner of our involvement in Iraq; our preference for the spoils of trade over human rights concerns. And so on.

We are not, however, the only political community to behave in ways which undermine the practice of what I call a high humanism, a belief in the importance of each individual and the communities in which they live; a belief in the vital nature of human rights. In our region there are many nations which claim democracy as their form of government, which affirm the need for human rights in both domestic and international politics, and yet which also behave in ways that belie these public pronouncements.

One of the ways in which Australians may show a commitment to the high humanism of which I speak would be to join with those in other societies around us who are also striving to help their co-nationals and governments remember what it is to be human and humane. In what follows I want to look at the work of one such commentator — Chandra Muzaffar. It would be easy, particularly in the case of this man, to write a piece which lauded his virtues and cited him as an example to follow. What I want to do instead is to highlight what may be the central difference between the way in which a devout Muslim intellectual defends a high humanism, and how I along with many of my contemporaries would. I do this not out of a bid to be antagonistic for its own sake, but because I believe — as indeed does Chandra Muzaffar — that a willingness to carry out a dialogue about our differences is a key to the preservation of our humanity.

So then, to Chandra Muzaffar. Muzaffar is a well-known figure on the scene of human rights advocacy in Southeast Asia, and globally. He has been an active participant in political debate and protest, has been jailed by his government for his preparedness to dissent, and has been a ceaseless agitator for change and reform. Chandra Muzaffar has thus taken the stand on many issues. The range of issues Muzaffar engages with is very wide. On the one hand, he is very well known for his commentary on issues in Malaysian politics, and the politics of ASEAN and the region more generally — as well as for his vital concern with the structures of international affairs more generally. On the other hand, his contributions also range over more historical and philosophical perspectives on politics, ethics and religion. I shall engage with some of the latter here.

Let me begin by citing some paragraphs from his recent book Rights, Religion and Reform:
Let us admit it: our vain attempt to build a glorious civilisation by ignoring, even denying, God has failed miserably. The twentieth century—the most secular century ever—has also been the most violent century in human history. As the century draws to a close, rapid globalisation is bringing to the fore some of the iniquities and injustices that divide humankind. It is only too apparent that in politics and economics, as in culture and social relations, moral considerations have little weight or values.

This is why at the end of the millennium our greatest need is to remember God. The remembrance of God is not some fanatical plea for a return to rigid religious dogma. To remember God is to uphold justice, for justice, the Qur’an tells us, was the mission of each and every prophet. To remember God is to strive for peace; it is to uphold freedom; it is to ensure the equality of all human beings. The remembrance of God is the expression of compassion in our daily lives.

To remember God, in short, is to fulfill our role as God’s trustee. By fulfilling our role as God’s trustee we are in fact reminding ourselves of who we are and why we are here and what lies beyond this transient life. There can be no better reminder for humankind as we enter the third millennium.

Muzaffar is passionate about human rights, but this passion, so he argues, is grounded in a spirituality, a religious worldview, which makes sense of human rights. In Muzaffar’s view, the tragedies which we name using the language of human rights stem from our failure to adequately live according to the spirituality or religious worldview which ultimately is what marks us out as humans in the first place. Muzaffar’s commitment to human rights, then, is dependent upon a religious metaphysics; moreover, he argues that any such commitment to human rights ultimately requires this religious metaphysic.

Muzaffar is right that a commitment to metaphysics is required for us to make sense of human rights. The simplest way of putting this is that in order to defend human rights, we need to be able to supply some answers to the following sorts of questions: Why do we have human rights at all? What is it about being a human being that gives me value? Why are my rights of equal value to those of others? And so on. These are big questions, and in societies like my own—middle-class Adelaide—the customary set of answers to these questions is so well known, and so well integrated into society, that people often see the answers to these questions as commonplace, common sense, obvious—self-evident, even. This too was the case for those who originally formulated human rights as they have come down to us through history: the first human rights declarations speak about our rights as being self-evident truths.

And like Muzaffar (and importantly for my argument here) many of these documents and the people behind them also thought of the existence of a divine and benevolent creator as a self-evident truth. This, however, is something that even in middle-class Adelaide (“the city of churches”) is no longer taken for granted. But Muzaffar’s arguments, the presence of God in the philosophical traditions which ground human rights, and the re-awakened awareness of the role of religion in international affairs (for good and ill) together suggest the need to keep this question before us today. Both in the West and in the South, political and intellectual leaders, and religious people of various persuasions, are claiming the authority of God for their agendas and values. Those with a commitment to human rights will want to be sure that God is in the fray for all humans, if indeed God is in the fray at all. In the latter case, if anything the issue becomes more pertinent.

I shall return to this question presently. But I want first to take a look at the foundations of Muzaffar’s ethics. Muzaffar argues that in international affairs there must be a commitment to the transcendent, to values which go beyond human need or interest and are absolute in their nature. It is these transcendent values which give meaning and significance to our political values. This is why Muzaffar claims that we must remember God. The remembrance of God is to remember why and how to bring justice, peace, equality, freedom and compassion to human beings. The remembrance of God, from this view, is the foundation of ethics in human affairs.

But how do we remember God?

This immediately brings us to one of the tensions in Muzaffar’s approach. His remembrance of God, or the adoption of a spiritual worldview, is avowedly and unashamedly universalist. However, any knowledge of this universal spiritual philosophy is always going to be inescapably particularist. This is clearly the case for Muzaffar, who’s universalism is itself born out of a very specific interpretation of Islam. In the quotation above, we see that the remembrance of God, for Muzaffar, is not actually
the articulation of a universal spiritual philosophy, but it is a particularly expansive reading of one kind of moderate Malaysian Islam.\textsuperscript{6}

An important part of Muzaffar's religious metaphysics, as we have seen, is that remembering God gives humanity a transcendent context. The difficulty is that any claim to transcendence is always mediated through specific humans, with all of their particularistic baggage. In Muzaffar's account, a religious philosophy must be central to our approach to politics and ethics because it is God that gives humans value, and it is through religion that we know about God. Thus religion and God are attempts to escape the nihilism that it is often thought attends an exclusively anthropocentric worldview. However, this attempt to avoid nihilism and to give humans certain meaning does not succeed. This is for the very reason that proponents of religion like Muzaffar use to support the need for transcendence: namely, that human experience is mediated via human consciousness, and thus can only be fundamentally anthropocentric.\textsuperscript{7}

The religious say this is why we need the transcendental: because by ourselves we cannot reach beyond the limitations of the human condition. The irony is that any claim to articulate the transcendent that we need to get beyond ourselves, must always be mediated by ourselves, must come from ourselves. Claimed knowledge of the beyond is still knowledge mediated by the human. Thus, the claim to exceptional knowledge by the religious is unconvincing because the basis of that exceptional knowledge is not actually different from that of the non-religious: neither has direct or unmediated access to knowledge – of the transcendent, or of anything else.\textsuperscript{8}

This, in turn, is where some of the political implications of Muzaffar's position start to make themselves felt. The assertion that we must have a universal religious worldview in order to ascribe meaning and value to human community obviously leaves those who find such a view difficult to comprehend out in the cold. Those who accept the critiques of traditional religious claims and authority will not in good conscience be able to accept Muzaffar's arguments. And it seems that there is very little room in his account for people who fall into this category. So we have the ironic (if common enough) situation where an attempt is made to ground the concern for human value and ethical worth, human rights and other humane political ideals, in a broader ideological system which itself turns out to be exclusive and exclusionary – despite its claims to be universal and all-encompassing.

Again, Muzaffar argues the following:

It should be apparent from our discussion so far that the main element in our spiritual vision of the human being is the belief in God. The cure we [suggest] is to the five challenges [we face] – curbing greed and acquisitiveness, limiting power, emphasising universal justice, recognising the unity of the human being and nature, and providing a sound moral basis to all economic and even non-economic activities – have, as their ultimate referral point, the concept of God.\textsuperscript{9}

Muzaffar's claim has a certain attractive logic behind it. While being a devout Muslim himself, he argues strongly that all of the world's great religions have shared conceptions of transcendence and absolute values, and that these – among other things – point to our moral unity as a species, point to our role as God's trustee and steward. These universal and absolute values then serve as the foundation for the rights and responsibilities we acquire as human beings.\textsuperscript{10} Thus, the social issues of human existence are linked to God.

But, it is with precisely this linkage that a number of aspects of Muzaffar's account become questionable. Let's take two examples: the role of women in society, and the acceptability of homosexual practice. How exactly is it that these two social issues should be linked with God, and the alleged universal or transcendent values with which the remembrance of God represents? On the first of these issues, Muzaffar speaks like a Western liberal. Gender myths (i.e. traditional patriarchal practice and ideology) must be what they are: forms of injustice. But this puts Muzaffar at odds with the vast majority of defenders of religious faith and practice, who advocate various forms of inequality between men and women (a situation which is true in Sydney as it is in Kuala Lumpur). Whereas with the issue of women Muzaffar appears to be on the side of the liberal progressives, with the issue of homosexuality Muzaffar is a conservative.

Homosexuality is only mentioned in passing in the book noted above, but it is taken to be one of the degenerate signs of our failure to embrace a universal spiritual worldview (e.g. p.190). The impression is given that a view like my own – where homosexual practice can be as legitimate an expression of 'God's love' in human affairs as any other form of love – be roundly condemned.

Muzaffar is right then, and that we need to ground our belief in all human beings – advocates the equality of the human being and the value of the human as the answer to the need for transcendence.

The vision that seems to take into account the element of the modern globalised world, wants to use his address this environment with a modern globalised ethic of difference, identity, historicity and pluralism. Muzaffar's universal spirituality is the same Achilles he seeks to use. It is quite straightforward for modern universal elements to escape our sectarianism.

But as the contemporary world may be easy to describe in terms of equality, as universal elements, will be fraught with its own forms of violence and inequality. Some forms of violence in society are invidious practices (e.g. capital punishment) – it is not, however, a reasonable matter of how to reduce it (the case of capital punishment or usury or it is that within the protection of the law, the return below).

The link between the transcendent dimension of religion and the actual practices of life is subject to a variety of forces, capacities for resistance.
It is possible that one of the reasons why Australia finds itself somewhat confused (to put it mildly) about its moral compass in our times is because we do not talk about these things often enough, or with sufficient attention to detail and depth of engagement.

affairs as any other form of sexuality can be — would be roundly condemned.11

Muzaffar is right that we need to fight for justice and that we need an appropriate metaphysics to ground our belief in the values and significances of all human beings — a metaphysics that proudly advocates the equality of all individuals and the moral unity of the human species. But I am sceptical about the value of Muzaffar’s universal spiritual philosophy as the answer to this quest.

The vision that Muzaffar articulates does not seem to take into account the intellectual environment of the modern globalised world: and yet he wants to use his universal spiritual philosophy to address this environment. The intellectual life of the modern globalised world is one in which cultural difference, identity, interpretation, contingency, historicity and pluralism are all social facts. Muzaffar’s universal spiritual philosophy seems to have the same Achilles heel of much contemporary liberal commentary: the assumption that it is somehow straightforward to identify authoritatively what the universal elements of the world’s religions are and to escape our sectarianism and put them into practice. But as the concrete issues used above show, while it may be easy to say that all religions insist on justice, or equality, as universal values, the content of these will be fraught. Is it unjust to stop gays from practising their sexuality? Is the equality in the phrase ‘women are equal but different’ really about equality? Many other examples could be essayed here: capital punishment; family law; matters economic — in the case of Islam, for example, the prohibition on usury or interest; the standing of unbelievers within the political community (to which I shall return below).

The link between Muzaffar’s claim that we need a transcendent divine in order to secure our own value, and the actual practical ethics which then ensue, is subject to factors which actually quarantine our capacity for moral knowledge from any transcendent source. The transcendent — in any strict sense — becomes a merely formal intellectual theory which forever must remain empty. Any attempt to fill it with content is always and has always been the result of human activity, human interpretation of our moral situation, human anticipation of the best way of dealing with our moral dilemmas. The Qur’an was given to the Prophet: a man; Jesus the Christ was a man; we know of God’s appearance to the Patriarch Abraham because of the stories recorded and interpreted by humans. God, as well as the remembrance of God, comes to us via ourselves: the bid for transcendence seems fundamentally and inescapably human at its core.12 As Mahatma Gandhi said of inspired texts: “Firstly, they come through a human prophet, and then through the commentaries of interpreters. Nothing in them comes from God directly”.13

And this brings us to the crux of the matter: the justice which Muzaffar so passionately pursues is closer to our grasp when we recognise not the need for transcendence, but the need for a high humanism. We need to learn to trust our humanity. Recognition of and honesty about the anthropocentrism of all claims to transcendence is an important step here. And this in turn, or so I would argue, leads us to the advocacy of a liberal humanism rather than the advocacy of a necessarily religious universal spiritual philosophy.

Perhaps the most significant difference between the two is that liberalism, because of its commitment to a high humanism, and because of its non-partisan- ship at one level on the issue of religious belief, is able to provide a framework for the pursuit of justice and human rights which is not prima-facie exclusionary of those who in good conscience (or, for that matter, in bad), cannot accept a fundamentally religious account of what it means to be human.14

These people do remember God: it is after all true that much of liberalism finds its historical formation and the initial homes of its ideas in various of the religious traditions of the world. But in the modern
world, there are many for whom it is no longer possible to live with God in the way that our forebears may have. It is surely not acceptable then to posit as the foundation for global justice a philosophical system which these people cannot endure. Contrast, members of all the major faiths have made their homes in liberal societies in ways which enable them to maintain their genuine piety and to contribute to the justice of their society. In my view it is this model – even admitting its ambiguities and weaknesses – that we must pursue for international justice. It is in this fashion that we should remember God.

Australians are not always good at talking about the things which mean the most to them. The popular adage has it that there are three things one must not talk about at a barbecue: politics, religion and sex. All three are interrelated, and are more important to us than we often care to admit. They are also important to our neighbours in the region. Chandra Muzaffar does us the great service of talking about all three. It is possible that one of the reasons why Australia finds itself somewhat confused (to put it mildly) about its moral compass in our times is because we do not talk about these things often enough, or with sufficient attention to detail and depth of engagement. We have become complacent in our comfortable world and, because many of the benefits of globalisation have been accruing to us and making us happy, we have forgotten to think about those of our fellow humans who in one way or another suffer because of our material prosperity. Our economic, territorial and political choices all affect others. On my argument, our capacity to be the people of the fair go – our capacity to offer “Justice as Fairness” (in the language of the philosopher John Rawls) – to people in our own society and those abroad depends on our willingness to remember the humanity of others. Muzaffar and I may differ about whether this can finally be articulated in anthropocentric or transcendent terms. But Muzaffar’s provocation to think about these matters, to be willing to talk about them, is a provocation that Australians should attend to with gratitude.

1. He has also been a ceaseless organiser of the stand for others. The publication Human Wrongs: Reflections on Western Global Dominance and its Impact on Human Rights (JUST World Trust, Penang, 1996), an edited volume from a conference, is one such example. Muzaffar has also always eschewed engagement with those who disagree with him; a critical discussion of this publication and the conference that gave rise to it can be found in the book referenced in note three below.

2. See the home page of the NGO he is most closely associated with: JUST World Trust, <www.just-international.org/>


6. For another similar project from Malaysia, see the work of Sisters in Islam. Their website is: <www.sistersinislam.net/>; an academic treatment of their work by one of their own is Noraini Othman, ‘Grounding Human Rights in Non-Western Culture: Sharia and the Citizenship Rights of Women in a Modern Islamic State’, Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell (eds), The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights, CUP, Cambridge, 1999, pp.169–192.


8. For an interesting discussion of the transcendent among Western thinkers who are not religious orthodox, see Fergus Kerr, Immortal Longings: Versions of Transcending Humanity, SPCK, London, 1997.


11. cf. the recent report by the heads of the American and Canadian branches of the Anglican Communion on Homosexuality, titled ‘To Set Our Hope On Christ’, and written by Mark Mcintosh of Loyola University, Chicago.

12. See again, Kerr, Immortal Longings.

13. Many thanks to Vin D’Ouzy for pointing me to this reference: Mahatma Gandhi Collected Works, Harian, 5 December 1936, CD version, vol.70, p.177.


15. For a pertinent discussion of an international order which is liberal but aware of the political ambiguities in arguing for liberalism, see Duncan Ivison, Postcolonial Liberalism, CUP, Cambridge, 2002.
