

Learning to understand ‘the others’

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It is the holy month of Ramazan, the time when Muslims all over the world reflect on issues, pray and renew their relationship with God and fellow human beings. Part of that would be to learn to see our own world in a more realistic perspective, without excuses and pretences. We must also learn to cherish what is right and good in our own world; we must love ourselves to be able to love others. Indeed, we should learn to feel empathy and compassion with others.

If Muslims and the rest of humanity could seek to come closer to these ideals, not only during the ninth month in the Islamic Lunar Calendar, but also during the other eleven months, the world would become a much better place for all.

The famous religious thinker and teacher Karen Armstrong says that we should not feel pity for others, but rather try to endure with them and put ourselves in their shoes. We should live by the Golden Rule, never do to others what we would not like others to do to us – so simple, yet so difficult.

In her book, *A Letter to Pakistan*, Armstrong discusses the twelve basic principles or steps of what has been named a ‘charter for compassion’. The 100-page book was published by Oxford University Press in Pakistan in 2011. It is a quiet, thought provoking document of value to all of us in our everyday life and in our actions in a wider context, at home and in the wider globalized world. In the latter fields, innumerable actions would have been entirely different if we had listened to the messages in Karen Armstrong’s book, including in North Waziristan, and as regards inequalities between rich and poor, men and women, in the situation of the in-school and out-of-school children, and so on.

The current shocking Israel-Palestine crisis, with the murders of youth which gave excuse for counter-actions, would have been entirely different if empathy and compassion with ‘the others’ had been shown. How can the stronger, notably Israel, allow its state system to be used in the ways we have recently seen without every citizen demanding a softer and more humane state?

It is easy for me to point a finger. But it is also right to do it, as a reminder to all of us, even if we are not involved in decisions about the big issues, but just actions in our everyday lives. Yet, such actions are as important, and they are what we can influence.

A few days ago, I had the opportunity to listen to some foreigners talking about what they thought was right and wrong in Pakistan. Sadly, they had little positive to say. I came to reflect on the discussion afterward, and I wondered why foreigners, especially middle-aged men and women from the industrialized West, so often feel they, just after a few months or a year or two, have the right to criticize a host country, even if there may be obvious faults. How much have they tried to learn about the new land, about ‘the others’, and what eye glasses have they had worn? Do they feel compassion with the people in the land, or are they just arrogant visitors for a while? Do we think in terms of ‘I, we and the others’, placing ourselves at a pedestal as if we and our lands were faultless?

When I was a young student in education and development studies, and later a researcher, doing several stints of fieldwork in East Africa, 30-40 years ago, I often discussed the mentioned *besserwisser* attitudes with other local and foreign academics; today, it seems that we don’t question our own attitudes as much.

A generation ago, there were technical assistance personnel from the West in Africa. In Tanzania, for example, my home country Norway had 30-40 experts, plus up to 50 in the Peace Corps, working as secondary school teachers and in other middle-level jobs. In the latter group, there was debate, while there was less of it among the experts. As students and researchers, we used to criticize the experts for not analyzing their roles, opinions and behaviour. We were especially critical if the spouses were as opinionated, if not more, than their husbands; we would say that they did not have the adequate tools, knowledge and a milieu around them, to understand the new society.

True, also those who came from the social sciences, like I did, would need a long time and a lot of hard work to be able to understand the new land, its people, institutions, and so on, in order to be able to give a fair analysis of issues in the country. But at least, most of us were humble and realized that we could not become specialists on 'the others' overnight.

Some students and researchers dug deeper into the issues. Terje Tvedt, now a professor, wrote a best-selling book entitled *Images of the Others*, about developing countries in the era of development aid. And he wrote another book, *The Norwegian Samaritan*, about rituals, self-images and development aid, also with reference to NGOs and missionary organizations, the latter often claiming better knowledge about 'ordinary people'.

In addition, we discussed how our 'fieldwork' should be implemented so that we could be able learn and understand more, and refrain from being judgmental and draw superficial outsiders' conclusions. Anthropologists have always underlined the importance of this, but have nevertheless not always practiced it.

We discussed the way diplomats worked, and we wondered how much they would be able to understand, since their own status and contacts were mostly at higher and formal levels. (It would be the topic of at least one other article to consider diplomats' ability to learn and understand the countries they work in, taking the many limitations into considerations.) Today, one can base much of the information gathering in thorough newspaper reading, but in Tanzania, the media were quite poor that time, and foreign reporters were also few and far between, and would perhaps also be biased. Several years later, when I came back to the country as a diplomat myself, I experienced how little we managed to learn, not because of bad will, but simply because of the institutional culture and limitations, and the general workload.

In conclusion, when we try to learn about 'the others', we must have real interest in doing so. We must, in our heart and mind, feel empathy and compassion with others. We must not only see things through our own eye glasses, based on own opinions and background, without proper social science tools. True, general knowledge may take us half way, if our willingness to learn is genuine. But we also need methods and indeed time to learn and understand. Finally, we must be careful with terminology; in given situations, we all belong to 'the others'. We must show tolerance and understanding with all, strong or weak, in a diverse and multicultural world. In Pakistan, I believe we all, regardless of religion and faith, feel included in the spirit of the holy month of Ramazan. Let us cherish that together.

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