HUMILIATION AS THE SOURCE OF TERRORISM:

A NEW PARADIGM

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The horrific events on the 11th September 2001 in the United States shocked the world. The terror attacks show, to my understanding, a cycle of humiliation[1] between the Western and the non-Western peoples.

Basically all human beings yearn for recognition and respect; their denial or withdrawal is experienced as humiliation. Humiliation is the strongest force that creates rifts and breaks down relationships among people. The desire for recognition, that is universal, unites all human beings and can serve as a platform for contact and cooperation. Ethnic, religious or cultural differences do not by themselves create rifts. On the contrary, diversity can be a source of mutual enrichment, but only when diversity is embedded within relationships characterized by mutual respect. When respect and recognition are absent, those who feel victimized by humiliation are prone to highlight differences, in order to justify rifts that exist or that are created.

Men such as Osama bin Laden would never have any followers if there were no victims of humiliation in many parts of the world, victims who are young, intelligent and dynamic men, and who are willing to die avenging their humiliations.

The rich and powerful West has long been blind to the fact that its superiority may have humiliating effects on those who are less privileged. The affluent West teaches the ideals of human rights and equality while, at the same time, inflicting inequality and poverty on the non-Western peoples. The very ideal of human equality heightens the feelings of humiliation among the underprivileged.

The Feelings of Women Who Wish To Bear Martyrs

In Egypt, where I worked as a psychological counsellor from 1984–1991,[2] I had Palestinian clients, who came to me with severe

depression because they felt they should help their suffering families in Palestine, instead of studying in Cairo and preparing for a happy life.

A young woman, not yet 20 years old, sought my help. Let me call her Farida. She expressed herself as follows:

> My father wants me to study, get married, and have a life. But I cannot smile and laugh and think of a happy life, when at the same time my aunts and uncles, my nieces and other family members face suffering in Palestine. This suffering is like a heavy burden on me…. Sometimes I cannot sleep. Our people are suffering and we should stand by them. If we cannot help them directly, we should at least not be heartless and forget them altogether. I feel that I do not have any right to enjoy life as long as my people suffer…. I would go to my homeland, get married and have as many sons as I could have…. I would be overjoyed to have a martyr as a son, a son who sacrifices his life for his people. I feel that suicide bombers are heroes, because it is hard to give your life. I want to give my life. I want to do something. I cannot just sit here in Cairo and watch my people suffer…. Their suffering eats me up. I feel so powerless, so heavy. The burden crushes me. What shall I do?[3]

I tried to give her strength and discussed with her how she could contribute to a more just world after her studies, in a peaceful way, and how this would be more beneficial to her people and the entire world than giving birth to suicide bombers. Her involvement and sincerity were intense, pure, deep and selfless.

I remember a young German woman—she was 19 years old and had bulimia; let me call her Rita. Her words were the following:

> I am appalled by the violence in the world, the destruction of the environment, and the lack of sincerity around me. I am a good student, a very good one. And I cannot live in a world where men play around with the world, with women and nature, and bring suffering about to all of us…. This world makes me choke. I am so nauseated that I do not want to eat. As long as I manage to refrain from eating, I feel pure, ascetic, as if I can escape the pollution around me by saying "no." But then I get very hungry, and I start eating, and because I eat too much, I have to force myself to vomit. This in turn makes me feel extremely guilty…. Here I am, I say to myself, eating too much and vomiting, while millions of

people do not have enough to eat. I want to do something, but I don't know what! I feel so powerless and heavy!

These two young women resembled each other. Both were highly intelligent, with an IQ considerably above average, with a bright future ahead, and they did not know how to deal with the violence, neglect, and thoughtlessness they perceived around them. They were strong women, with an acute awareness of justice, whose strength was wasted because they saw no constructive way out. They felt caught in a hopeless situation. The Palestinian woman found solace in dreaming about sacrificing her life, as the mother of sons who would give their lives to defend their people. The German woman did not have any such vision; however, she thought that asceticism was a solution, an asceticism that went too far for her own abilities. Other young women, like Rita, manage to kill themselves by not eating—we call that anorexia nervosa, while others, who do not induce vomiting, oscillate between asceticism and obesity.[4]

The Significance of Humiliation for Men

I had in Egypt some male Palestinian students as clients as well, and they dreamt of giving their lives for Palestine. None of these young clients was driven by any "will to power" or inherent "hatred." They were driven by despair about the sufferings they perceived around them. They suffered from empathy, a "noble" suffering. However, they suffered also from short sighted, impatient and counterproductive strategies to provide their empathy with relief, similar to the alcoholic who believes that alcohol solves problems. In other words, the starting point, empathy for sufferings of others —a "noble," "sincere," and "valuable" suffering— contrasted starkly with "destructive" strategies for action, destructive for the bearers of these strategies as well as for the social fabric of a global community. I was aware that these young persons were vulnerable to being recruited by leaders who could instrumentalize their ability for empathy and use them for acts of destruction.

The core of their problem is the phenomenon of humiliation.[5] Many scholars and experts identify deprivation as the main culprit of problems such as "grievances," "resentment," "embitterment," or "backlash"; however, I believe that deprivation is not automatically perceived as a form of suffering that calls for action. It is deprivation that is perceived as an illegitimate violation of ideals of equality and

dignity and it is seen as a humiliation that has to be responded to with profound sincerity.

Deprivation may have many faces: poverty, low status, or marginalization—there is a host of words describing it. However, poverty, low status and marginalization do not automatically elicit feelings of suffering or even despair. A religious person may join a monastery and be proud of poverty, low status may be explained as God's will or a just punishment for sins perpetrated in an earlier life, and also marginalization may be fundamental for pride; not all minorities feel oppressed. Furthermore, poverty may motivate a person to work hard in order to get out of it; parents may sacrifice to enable their children to have an education and a better life; and every small incremental step towards a better quality of life may be celebrated. The question must be: what is it that transforms deprivation into unbearable suffering of a kind that triggers severe depression or the urge to retaliate with violence?

The answer is feelings of humiliation. They may lead to acts of humiliation perpetrated on the perceived humiliator, setting off cycles of humiliation in which everybody who is involved feels humiliated, and is convinced that humiliating the humiliator is a just and holy duty.

How do feelings of humiliation come about? They come about when deprivation is perceived as an illegitimate imposition of lowering or degradation, one that cannot be explained in constructive terms. This elicits yet another question: Do we—members of communities around the world today—live in contexts that make us accept explanations for deprivation such as those mentioned above, explanations alluding to God's will, or to nature's order, or to punishment for past failings? No. We live in a world which is listening to the following message of human rights: every human being has a right to live in enabling circumstances; equality, not hierarchy, is the ruling idea; and every person has an inner core of dignity that ought not be lowered. This message is heard. However, it has not had the effect that many human rights advocates hope for; namely, to decrease suffering around the world. On the contrary, in the first instance, it strengthened feelings of humiliation, because inequalities and deprivation, which were accepted before, turn into unacceptable acts of humiliation perpetrated by the powerful on the less powerful. Moreover, acts of humiliation create feelings of humiliation that in turn have a potential to lead to retaliating acts of humiliation.

When I came to Africa in 1998, to study the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the 1988 quasi-genocide in Somalia, I received the following initial message:

You from the West, you come here to get a kick out of our problems. You pretend to want to help or do science, but you just want to have some fun. You have everything back home, you live in luxury, and you are blind to that. All what you want is to have fun, get a good salary, write empty reports back home or publish some articles, in order to be able to continue this fraud. You pay lip service to human rights and empowerment! You are a hypocrite! We feel deeply humiliated by your arrogant and self-congratulating help!

In short, this message went as follows:

First you colonize us.
Then you leave us with a so-called democratic state that is alien to us.
After that you watch us getting dictatorial leaders.
Then you give them weapons to kill half of us.
Finally you come along to "measure" our suffering!

The buzzword that dominated my research in Africa was "double standard," or lack of "even-handedness." In my experience, human rights taught in the West are surprisingly close to African norms on the cohesion of the social fabric. For example, Red Cross sponsored a study about ethical norms in the war in Somalia (*Spared from the Spear*, International Committee of the Red Cross Somalia Delegation, 1997). Somali scholars collected ethical norms laid down in their traditional teachings. They discovered that their local Somali rules were virtually identical with the Geneva Convention. In other words, human rights are universal insofar as they mirror, within a small range of variation, the ethical codifications of social cohesion within all human societies. They reflect what I call "inside" ethics; that is ethics aimed at maintaining long-term social relationships within the community members ("us"). A host of different ethical rules reigns over relationship with outsiders ("them")— "outside" ethics. Human rights represent "inside" ethics, however, on a global scale. They are an expression, a wish, or a vision, that "inside" ethics may reign inside the global village, inside the global community of human beings. The advent of human rights is an indication of the advent of a single global community of "us."

Feelings of humiliation are triggered when Westerners, who preach human rights and the inclusion of every human being within a

global "us," are perceived as violators of their very own preaching. This is seen as "double standards." Those who believe in human rights, but are deprived of them, feel humiliated. Currently the gap between rich and poor is increasing, both globally and locally, and this is a visible breach of human rights for those who learn about these rights, and who have stopped accepting inequalities as part of a divine order. Their feelings of humiliation are deepened by double standards.

Women in many societies traditionally are given the task of carers, while men are educated to fight. Because of this caring role, women tend to react with depression when they feel helpless, oppressed or humiliated.[6] Women are not supposed to fight, and they tend to turn the expression of their feelings inwards. Farida did not want to take up weapons herself; however, she wanted to give birth to sons who could fight. Rita did not know against what to fight; therefore, she retreated to mere asceticism. However, my male Palestinian clients thought of taking up weapons. Rita's male friends with similar sets of problems as hers were drawn to alcohol, or other more exteriorised ways of expressing their problems, in contrast to Rita's inwards orientation.

Concluding Remarks

The meaning of the word humiliation has changed during the past centuries. The pre-human-rights world accepted hierarchical societal structures as legitimate; thus, acts of humiliation—beatings, torture, and subjugation—were regarded as legitimate means employed by masters to keep down underlings. This world of hierarchy was also characterized by the role of male honour. Males were responsible for defending the honour of their families; honour was determined by status within the hierarchy. This honour system still prevails in some cultures.[7] The old rationale for humiliation as acts necessary for "keeping order," or "teaching lessons to underlings," becomes transformed in the context of human rights; the humiliation of being treated as second class beings, is seen as immoral. The old male honour order still exists alongside the advent of a new order—ideals of equality and human rights. However, in both contexts humiliation is a violation, and in both contexts it is likely to trigger negative responses.

Heightened feelings of humiliation have profound effects on people. Many of my female clients in Europe with eating disorders, could be said to suffer from a diffused perception of the fact that gender equality is preached but not reached, and that ideals call for the protection of ecological sustainability and peace around the world,

while in reality these very ideals are violated. My Palestinian clients perceived in their lives and community similar gaps of justice, between ideals on one side and reality on the other.

Those who preach human rights had better become aware that the feelings of humiliation around the world become intensified when the reality of life does not exemplify the teachings of human rights. Furthermore, the effect of human rights teachings is no longer limited to the male honour that is provoked through acts of humiliation. Women have also started to feel that their lives and their dignity, expected to be protected by human rights, are also violated when humiliation is inflicted on them.

Farida, my Palestinian client who wanted to give birth to suicide bombers was responding to humiliation, but within the old order of male honour, as did her male colleagues who wanted to take up arms. My female German clients, on the other side, who felt depressed about the state of the world and responded with eating disorders, would in former times have developed into devout wives and happy mothers, have now resorted to self-destruction. It may be emphasised that these clients are intelligent, bright and hard-working students, who represent the hope of the future.

What alternative do the humiliated persons have? The world does offer alternate models for social change, apart from self-destructive depression or other-destroying violence. Nelson Mandela could be a role model. He succeeded in transforming humiliations he suffered, during his 27 years of imprisonment, into a constructive force for societal change. He fought within himself the urge for revenge. He did not become a Hitler.

This ability to conquer the urge for revenge is a sign of personal strength and great maturity. It is this very maturation that the world has to bring about in all people in our global village, all those who are tortured by the feelings of humiliation and are drawn towards violent acts of retaliation against the entire social fabric. Third parties—the mature and moderate persons—are needed to bring about this transformation. Mature, moderate, responsible people, who promote patient change and long-term solutions, should be called upon to invite young, intelligent people driven to extremism, to follow the example of a Nelson Mandela. They should not follow the promoters of terror who preach violent retaliation.

Notes

1. The phenomenon of humiliation has hardly been studied explicitly so far; it is, however, part and parcel of research on trauma, shame, abuse, or violence. Scheff and Retzinger, see Scheff (1990), extended their work on violence and Holocaust and studied the part played by "humiliated fury" (Scheff 1997, 11) in escalating conflict between individuals and nations. Also Gilligan, a psychiatrist, focused on humiliation as a cause for violence. See his book, *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and How to Treat It* (1996). Volkan (1997) and Montville (1990) carried out important work on psycho-political analysis of intergroup conflict and its traumatic effects. Furthermore, Staub's work is highly significant; he is a great name in peace psychology. See Staub (1989); Staub (1990); Staub (1993); Staub (1996). Miller (1993) is the only author known to the present researcher who used the word humiliation in the title of a book. There are two special editions of academic journals, which carry the word humiliation: *Journal of Primary Prevention* (1991, 1992, and 1999), and *Social Research* (1997). The latter was stimulated by *The Decent Society* (1996) by Margalit. Zehr covers related ground in his book, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (1990). Hartling developed a Humiliation Inventory (published 1999) where a rating from 1 to 5 is employed for questions measuring "being teased," "bullied," "scorned," "excluded," "laughed at," "put down,"

"ridiculed," "harassed," "discounted," "embarrassed," "cruelly criticized," "treated as invisible," "discounted as a person," "made to feel small or insignificant," "unfairly denied access to some activity, opportunity, or service," "called names or referred to in derogatory terms," or viewed by others as "inadequate," or "incompetent."

2. From 1984–1987 I was a psychological counsellor at the American University in Cairo, and from 1987–1991 I had my own private practice. My clients came from diverse cultural backgrounds, many from the expatriate community in Cairo, such as Europeans, Palestinians, and Africans, both of western-orientation, and traditional-orientation.

3. I try to capture the essence of her message, and will use, as much as possible, her way of speaking English.

4. My field of psychological counselling from 1980–1984 was "eating disorders," and I led therapeutic groups with women with such disorders.

5. The research project for my doctoral dissertation in social psychology was entitled: *The Feeling of Being Humiliated: A Central Theme in Armed Conflicts. A Study of the Role of Humiliation in Somalia, and Rwanda/Burundi, Between the Warring Parties, and in Relation to Third Intervening Parties.* I have been a counsellor for more than 20 years.

6. When I worked as a medical student at a psychiatric hospital, in 1983, I was amazed, how clear this tendency was.

7. Southern Cultures' of honour are described by Nisbett and Cohen (1996) and Miller (1993).

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