

Interlude

To an Expanding World of Mind-Closure

Wole Soyinka

It was at a gathering of Nobel Laureates in Paris, in February 1987, a meeting that was organized by Elie Wiesel under the patronage of President Mitterand, that I first felt obliged to alert the world to the rising aggression of religious intolerance and its territorial ambitions. The triumph of intellectual skepticism over the closed, utopian text called Marxism had created a vacuum, it seemed obvious to me, leaving the way open for its occupation by other utopian texts, of which the most aggressive candidate would prove to be religious fundamentalism. A few months later, the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie was pronounced, leaving both the "mainstream" religious, and the secular world stunned, and unprepared.

It is unfortunate that, thanks to Western paranoia, especially within its media, the word "fundamentalism" is no sooner uttered than it is equated with an apocalyptic vision of Moslem (that is, barbaric) hordes sweeping down on western civilization and reducing the values of occidental society to prehistoric rubble. Such an attitude ignores the fact that fundamentalism is a feature of, indeed is part of the history of most religions, and that it violates the adherents of such religions even more brutally than outright unbelievers. Having limited a universal phenomenon to specific religious geographies therefore, the Western world finds itself restrained by a fear of sounding xenophobic in reacting to a clearly global disorder. Those of us who are on the direct firing line of fundamentalism in several aspects of social and political life cannot afford however to be restrained by the escapisms of guilt or – to utilize that brain damaged phrase – political correctness. We dare not indulge in the usual palliatives and ploys of appeasement that attempt to cover a virulent phenomenon in evasive language.

Much has happened to confirm the tide of these atavistic offensives in several arenas of conflict – including those that are little known and poorly publicized. But it is not simply religion that is at issue here, there is also identity and “otherness” – which, as in the case of Rwanda, has led to an unprecedented debasement of humanity in contemporary history. But it all begins with dogmatism in ideas, even intuitions, that then extend to secular life, tendencies that result in the submergence of rationality within emotiveness, the expropriation of the individual will by self-righteous but hyperactive and power-driven entities, often, ironically, a minority. It is also a fact of life however that such minorities are mostly to be found within that emotive world of superstition known as religion, which has learnt to prey upon the spiritual yearnings of much of humanity in order to render it captive to its territorial ambitions.

And yet, the world is not without examples that can instruct us, examples that should rebuke the arrogance of such impulses and strengthen the will of the rest to resist their encroachments on that secular authority that is the common property, common denominator, and right of all of humanity. Let us therefore never weary of calling attention to the fact that religions do exist, as on the African continent, that can boast of never having launched a war, any form of jihad or crusade, for the furtherance of their beliefs. (Can anyone knowledgeable of the *orisa* of the Yoruba conceive – to remind ourselves of a quite recent outrage in India – of the followers of *Obatala* hurling themselves against, and tearing down a centuries old mosque because of a vision that it stands on the spot of that deity’s emanation in some unwitnessed, antediluvian age?) Despite such pacifism however, these beliefs have proved themselves bedrocks of endurance and survival – and of tolerance – transforming communities as far away from that continent as the Caribbean and the Americas. To both victims and agents of mind closure therefore, be it of the secular or the religious kind, we continue to preach:

Go to the *orisa*, and be wise. The religion of the *orisa* does not permit, in tenets, liturgy, catechism or practice, that pernicious dictum: *I believe, therefore, I am*. Nowhere in it will you find the sheerest skein of reasoning in that direction to human self-apprehension. Obviously, therefore, you will not find its

corollary: *You do not, therefore you are not.* Orunmila does not permit it. Obatala cannot conceive of it. Ogun will take up arms against it. Not one *odu* of *Ifa* so much as suggests it. This is not weakness in the character of this religion however, it is not even tolerance; it is simply – understanding. Wisdom. An intuitive grasp of the complexity of the human mind and a true sense of the infinite potential of the universe.