

From Chibok with Love

by

Wole Soyinka



Nobel Laureate and staunch defender of freedom and humanism, Wole Soyinka, joined Pakistani women's rights activist, Gulalai Ismail, in being honoured with the International Humanist Award at the World Humanist Congress 2014. Presenting the award to Wole Soyinka, British Humanist Association trustee Patricia Rogers argued that "In the sharpest possible contrast to the terrorist Boko Haram's dichotomous disavowal of 'western education' as alien to their world, Soyinka has long been the intellectual leader of distinctively African voices within the universal Enlightenment tradition." Soyinka's attendance was precluded by illness (he accepted his award via a recorded audio address, available below). In his August 12, 2014 speech Soyinka warned that humanists are in need of a stronger response to the scourge of fundamentalist terror, arguing "We need to deploy a new language whose message is: *the world is not your jurisdiction.*" And he warned that even moderate religious leaders bear responsibility if they fail to confront the perils of religion. Referring to the Nigerian Islamist extremists Boko Haram he said: "It's considered virtuous by some to abduct 200 girl pupils from a

sanctuary of learning in the name of a religion. We are reduced to pious incantations, such as: 'These are not the true followers of the faith – our faith does not sanction killings, abductions or the designation of other human being as infidels'. We have to ask such leadership penitents: 'Were there times when you kept silent while such states of mind, overt or disguised were seeding fanaticism around you? Are you vicariously liable?'"

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Perhaps Humanists should pause from time to time and ask themselves a simple, straightforward, even neighbourly question: *what do religionists really want?* Not what they worship – that is beyond rational comprehension for many but – what do they really *seek?* After all, society is built on the practical, unavoidable principle of co-existence. If this proposed exercise appears strange, it is perhaps because society is very much in denial, afraid to confront such a focused question lest it receive an answer that imposes unwanted responsibilities on the rest of its members. We prefer to take refuge in the narratives of ancient wrongs and even, sometimes legitimately, wallow in present contradictions.

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However, if society appears to be foundering, and along lines that clearly indicate religious factors – the world being in no shortage of current exemplars – then it becomes a duty, even for self-preservation, to understand what the various constituent parts seek for their self-fulfillment.

And so, to the question once again, *what do religionists really want?* For most, the answer is simple: “to serve God”, by whatever name. That, for the larger humanity should remain unexceptionable – the devil you know is better than the one you don’t. Unfortunately, not all religionists are content with that aspiration or else – even more critically! – raise issues of *how* they propose to fulfill such a supposedly harmless mission. We are speaking here of a resolute, but proliferating minority who declare their objective as the right to intervene dictatorially in the rights, mores and undertakings of others – all in the name of their presiding deity. This claim to the privileged exercise of Control is what plagues the world in ever expanding arenas of conflict, a belief that absolute authority is invested in them by a supreme, though invisible entity, to meddle in the lives of others, not even in an advisory role, not even as provider of optional guidelines, but with an absolutism that brooks no dissent. The ambition of such religionists is nothing less than to place all of humanity under their jurisdiction. That declaration is stark, undisguised. Its brutal efforts at actualization presently infest global existence, some parts more lethally than others but, with increasing assertiveness, including the insertion of ‘ sleeper’ warriors in seemingly insulated societies.

It is therefore not sufficient to decry religious extremism. The problem is best understood – and tackled – in terms of Domination against – Freedom, thus setting aside the emotive blackmail that accompanies a condemnation of the intolerable, indeed the all-out assault on humanity by the myrmidons of religious imperialism. Fundamentally, in spite of the prominence of schisms in the intensification of religious carnage, we should avoid distraction by the claims of one set of beliefs against another.

It is certainly of academic (historic) interest when one sect promotes the supremacy of precedence, to which a purity – and authenticity – of belief is then attached, as against later “corruption”, against which an orgy of purification is then launched. Or its reverse order – the proposition that the original Scroll of beliefs, known sometimes as Scriptures, was one of imperfection, the hidden conclusion of which has merely lain in wait in the wings, presumably to see how humans doom themselves in advance with the worship of false gods – until the emergence of Absolute Truth, ideally signaled by the appearance of a charismatic preacher. All these are noteworthy niceties, plus a thousand contradicting fragments and variations that pit one Sect of believers against another. They are areas of interest, often of mystification, but should never be allowed to obscure the fundamental truth as it affects the rest of us: that the conflict between Humanists and Religionists has always been one between the torch of enlightenment and the chains of enslavement. And let me state that one wishes that we were speaking merely of invisible chains. Alas, the chains we speak of are not only visible but cruelly palpable. All too often they lead directly to the gallows, to beheadings, to death under a hail of stones. In numerous parts of the world today the Scroll of Faith is indistinguishable from the Roll-call of Death.

What humanity has reaped from these Scrolls of Faith, pulled down from nowhere in the firmament by those who have been considered sages, prophets, messiahs etc. is one that has manifested itself historically as inimical to human inclusiveness and social cohesion. Yet such Scrolls continue to be advertised as documents that deserve human adulation, treated with reverence even by non-believers. Not even though disputes over the interpretation of their tenets – and even history – such as their coming-in-being – have spilled over millennia, continue till today, and have never ceased to foment strife of an increasingly virulent nature. It is such scrolls, treasured as Infallibility made flesh, that make the creed of humanism not only a necessary counter but a human imperative.

We are not yet speaking our own truths to Religion or else, are failing to find a language that penetrates, in an effective way, the hearing of that minority that needs to hear them, those whose mission is to set this palpable world on fire, through adherence to a vaporous hereafter where their incendiary mission in the substantive here and now will be rewarded. Humanism requires a new tactical language, and what that language expresses requires a drastic shift in emphasis. We must take on the duty of telling the enemy openly: it is not spiritual fulfillment that you seek but – Power. Control. Power in its crudest form. Humanism requires to develop a distinct philosophy of transformative aggression. At this moment in the lives of communities across the globe, taking note of the havoc wreaked daily by the doctrine of religious impunity, there is far too much appeasement and toleration in the language we bring to each confrontation. There comes a time when our humanity accepts that there must be an end to an attitude that is best captured in that Yoruba expression: *F'itiju k'arun*. Literally that means -contracting a disease through politeness. Translated yet again, this time into the fashionable language of social morbidity that mistakes sophistry for sophistication, it reads simply: *Political Correctness*.

In short, we have reached a pass where, paradoxically, tolerance is far more pernicious than intolerance. Far worse than both however is avoidance! An avoidance of socially uncomfortable issues, once the claims and sensibilities of religion are invoked, the timorous avoidance of that crucial avenue of socialized co-existence known variously as discussion, debate, discourse etc. – even argument – an avoidance that dooms the very enthronement of civilized norms of interaction, while opening thoroughfares of blood and destruction. For those of us who consider a bruising encounter with the mere weaponry of words and ideas infinitely preferable to the massacres that come suddenly upon community, infinitely preferable to the slaughter of innocents, often by the most degrading means, preferable to the mutilation of humanity in the name of whatever god or goddesses are invoked in the act, the subject of Religion is one that must be brought openly to the table with other national and global concerns – poverty, social welfare, corruption, shelter, soil erosion, hunger, disease, environmental degradation and all other societal mandates.

We are living in a world, it seems, where it is not only possible, but is considered virtuous by some to abduct two hundred girl pupils from a sanctuary of learning in the name of religion and the world is rendered impotent. We are reduced to pious incantations such as “These aggressors are not true followers of the faith. Our faith does not sanction killings, abductions, sectarian targeting or, the designation of other humans as infidels and thus, as disposable material in the promotion of Faith.

We have to ask such leadership penitents: were there times that you kept silent when such states of mind – overt or disguised – were seeding the grounds of fanaticism around you? Are you vicariously liable? When the present conflagrations were mere embers – did you, either by direct pronouncement or eloquent silence – fan those embers? Did you at the time tacitly spread the cloak of impunity for atrocities, once the divine right of Faith defence is invoked? Most crucially, is your perception of the world we all inhabit one that exists under your total jurisdiction? These are not rhetorical questions, but questions directed at the stubborn arrogance of faith attestation towards secular conviction, in the course of which co-existence becomes a laughable indulgence in contradictions. All these have become the *lived* questions in my part of the world – let others critically consider whether or not they are also pertinent to their own societies.

So when I am asked, what on earth is happening in your nation, Nigeria, I can only refer such puzzled questioners to my BBC Reith Lectures, “Climate of Fear”, which makes the question, more accurately – What is happening in *your* world? In those lectures, I warn that those who claim jurisdiction over the world under the banner of Faith will discover, sooner or later, that they have merely spawned yet others who will lay claim to a superior dedication to that faith over and above their predecessors. They proceed to supplant their mentors with their greater capability for instilling fear – and not merely fear among “infidels” but even more over their original mentors. This is the lesson that is being implanted today by the bloodiest strain of islamism – Boko Haram – that the world has known in recent times – if it is ever possible to expunge the memory of the Algerian experience! The lesson of Boko Haram is not for any one nation. It is not for the African continent alone. The world should wake up to the fact that the menace is borderless, aggressive, and unconscionable. Take note of their primary acts when the religious insurgents first swept into Northern Mali. Study the history of Boko Haram in its zones of operation since it first reared its head in Nigeria nearly a decade ago. ISIS is primarily about Power, religion its mere stalking horse.

In ever expanding regions of the world, human existence has turned brutish – at best, precarious and nightmarish, punctuated by horrors that appear to presage the very end of humanity and those values that attempt to define it. Through isolated acts of sudden and arbitrary violence, the world is being programmed to accept as due, collective punishment, any assaults on humanity as legitimate response to real, imagined, or purposely designated slights on religion an disrespect to its avatars – assaults that take place thousands of miles away from where the crime was allegedly committed. New generations will grow up regarding such exactions as the norm, while zombies walk among us, primed for any crime against humanity when the religious chord is twanged. The world of *Political Correctness* lies prostrate, contrite, in the face of offences that are not even of their own making.

So, what should be our response to such aggression? Each event must dictate its own methodology of response, but a basic rule is – certainly not a response that fails to take cognizance of the dynamic world context in which we exist. Certainly not a response that fails to challenge the arrogance of religious imperialism, and also redresses the permissive laxities of the past. We need to deploy a new language whose message is: *the world is not your jurisdiction*.

Each time some wound to religious sensibilities is used to unleash terror on innocent communities, the obvious response should be: invade and inundate that space with the very material that is alleged to have given offence. An aerial bombardment with weapons of the mind – invade that space through whatever medium of transmission is feasible. If textual – pages, chapters, illustrations, word clusters floating in space, descending on church steeples, minarets, schools, farms, factories, prisons, markets and barracks, floating down on the pompous, hypocritical chambers where self-designated theologians order the arrest, torture, imprisonment, decapitations and hangings of those alleged to be enemies of an unseen deity. Rain down leaflets on the Sambisa forests, where our children are presently held under conditions of extreme degradation and trauma, rain down leaflets that re-programme minds fallen victim of doctrinal abuse by religion. Prove even deeper the wounds of insecurity already gouged in the self-esteem of gloating, arrogant, seemingly crazed abductors – and their allies everywhere – who dance their mockery of the world on video.

It goes beyond Chibok and Sambisa Forest. The ultimate purpose remains paramount: to dent the sanctimonious self-righteousness of those who question our right to volition and human dignity. Collectively, we must irradiate the enclaves of religious atavism with humane alternatives, new vistas of the world, new insights into history, new propositions of human relationships – of gender, race, beliefs, classes and identities.

Above all, however – ACT! That imperative is upon us, will it or not. Act in a resolute manner that demonstrates that humanity is not so supine that it will absorb obscene affronts to its defining right of dignified existence.

I thank you for the honour of this Award. I dedicate it to the Prisoners of Innocence in the forest of Sambisa, Nigeria.

— WOLE SOYINKA

Source: *The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU)*. 12 August, 2014.
<http://iheu.org/wole-soyinkas-international-humanist-award-acceptance-speech-full-text/>