

Reflections On Pakistan From A Recent Visitor

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By Alan Jones

Pakistan is in the news - not least because of the violence leading up to the elections. H.L Mencken told us that "for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple, and wrong." Sometimes something happens and we're hit between the eyes not only with complexity but with a sense of both urgency and humility. Last month I traveled to Pakistan as part of a UPIC (US-Pakistan Interreligious Consortium) delegation led by the Reverend Robert Chase who runs a remarkable project -- Intersections International - which is part of the Collegiate Church of New York.

My involvement came through a sponsoring organization called Convergence, a bi-partisan group centered in Washington DC. Before I went to Pakistan, I thought I was reasonably informed. Now that I've had an absurdly short but intense five days there, I find that I know even less, except for two things: one, how intensely tribal human beings are, not least those who wouldn't admit to belonging to a tribe at all; and two, there is no substitute for personal contact and one-on-one relationships.

Not very profound insights in themselves but significant nevertheless, because my sense of tribe was greatly extended through finding new friends. The intense tribalism on the planet is fed by the lust for power by means of violence and death. But there's a countervailing "tribalism" which is convinced that if we are to survive and flourish we'd better realize that there really is only one tribe, one ethnic group and that's all of us. That surviving and flourishing will involve more and more of us

in the pursuit of justice and peace.

I found myself in Islamabad sitting next to the scariest looking Muslim in the room (given my prejudices and assumptions - surely modeled on Osama Bin Laden - white turban and dress -- suitable for hiding a weapon?). He had a large beard and an intense presence. I found out he was born in Bolton in the UK and now lives in Maryland where he has a farm, a body shop and an Islamic center. We hit it off right away and have become good friends. He is spiritually grounded and intellectually critical and we found that our approach to the great mystery of our different (but not so different) traditions were, in crucial respects, not so much sympathetic as identical.

I came away with two basic insights - one discouraging, the other bright with promise. First, the discouraging part. In some ways Pakistan is a basket-case of a nation. Public opinion polls reveal much that is neurotic and paranoid (not unlike other nations we might mention nearer home). One of our hosts - a distinguished academic - outlined for us the perceptions many Pakistanis have of us. There is overwhelming anti-American feeling revealed in the polls in Pakistan (it wasn't always so) Why? There are deep problems of perception that have been internalized.

Many are convinced that the War on Terror is really a War on Islam. Moreover this war is being encouraged by a deep conspiracy of Jews and Christians. The US government is not to be trusted because the US wants to break up Pakistan and take control of Pakistan's assets (the nuclear issue). Finally, the US wants to impose India's hegemony over Pakistanis. All of the Pakistani delegates agreed with the analysis but also insisted that the perception was distorted - a caricature. The encouraging insight was our interaction with Pakistani university students and faculty both in Islamabad and Lahore - particularly the

women, who were passionate, critical, articulate and energized. What was particularly striking was their clear and biting honesty both about their own country and their severe critique of the appalling ignorance of what is going on in the world and in our name on the part of the US populace.

Alasdair McIntyre some years ago in an essay "How to be a North American" wrote: "We become people one of whose aims is to make sure that we please others, so that they are pleased at being pleased by us. And this wanting to be liked is one of the great American vices that emerges from this refusal of particularity and conflict. Americans tend under the influence of this vice to turn into parodies of themselves - smiling, earnest, very kind, generous, nice people, who do terrible things quite inexplicably. We become people with no depth, no depth of understanding, masters of technique and technology, but not of ourselves." Colonel Tuan of the Republic of Vietnam once called Americans well-disciplined and generous but a people without a culture. He was not referring to high culture McIntyre commented,, "He meant that he could not recognize what it was about them that made them Americans in the way that he was Vietnamese. And I think that is what happens to people with no story to tell themselves, people who do not confront their future as a narrative future. They, or rather we, become superficial people, people with surfaces, public relations people."

It struck me that these young Pakistanis were speaking from the point of view of a culture - a culture to be sure that was being challenged by change but a culture nevertheless. Where to begin? It might seem rather thin simply to affirm that there are now strong ties and friendships between members of the two delegations. But these relationships are strengthened by a deep commitment to go on meeting both here and in Pakistan; and not only to meet but to work on projects which will build

bridges between our two countries.

It isn't as if we have to start from scratch. There is already a strong corps of Pakistani-Americans who are dedicated bridge-builders. What comes through when I reflect on my trip to Pakistan is my conviction of the urgency of a new vision for humanity. How can the best of religion be galvanized for the common good? One of my colleagues at the seminary where I taught for many years, often used this aphorism: "Don't let the demons set the agenda." It seems to me that this is a good injunction for our age both in our country and in our relations with others. It's time to jump into the complexity of things with a sense of urgency, humility and humor and realize that there is, in the end, only one ethnic group, only one human race.