

The myth of progress

A conversation with Dr. D. Latifa

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We live in very tensioned times when it comes to religion, culture and society. That seems a bit of a global fact. And when I listen to you and hear what you have to say about the situation in Pakistan, it doesn't seem like you have much faith in a better tomorrow – at least not in the near future. So here's a question I have posed quite some others as well during my travels through the Muslim world: do you think it's all in inevitable decay or do you think we're just in a difficult process that will lead to a more harmonious future?

Even though I'm not very optimistic about the current state of thing, I'm also not pessimistic. You know, decay is a part of life and all religions are in decay. It's an inevitable part of nature. I think the Hindu's got it right on this one. They talk of the Kali Yug and this is the Kali Yug. There's no doubt about it. But I'm not complaining, I'm just stating it as a fact. To think that it's all going to get better is to be caught in the myth of progress. A lot of people are caught in it. They think that it's about going up the mountain all the time.

I'm often in doubt myself, about this matter. Sometimes I see society as a whole evolving to a better future, sometimes I think it's just doing the things it has always done and sometimes I believe we're in a state of decay. So I'm not completely sure about the Kali Yug idea. Even though I might certainly see signs of it, at the same time I also can't ignore a certain 'upward' moral evolution. For example slavery has been abolished, racism isn't the accepted norm anymore and many concepts of the human rights have become a bit of a global common ground. So, historically speaking, human kind has taken steps which are, undeniably, huge moral steps forward.

That one I don't deny. But it remains a part of the myth of the ascent of the hero. We keep thinking there's some sort of Golden Fleece up there that we will eventually reach. We simply always forget there's a descent also.

The Qur'an teaches us something else. It takes the world as it is. It does not contain this notion of "you're going to make it a better place". We're put here as stewards of nature and we're supposed to get on with our lives. So the world really doesn't become 'better'. The world just keeps becoming different. For every gain there is a loss. And the situation of the environment today is the key indicator thereof. So yes, certain things were gained materially, but are we really better off? Aren't we destroying half of the planet in the process?

All the while, the fundamental issues remain, of course. For the real moral questions still are: do you treat your neighbor well and other ten-commandment-type things. So the real challenges will

be eternal. If you take the notion of pilgrimage for example, which is there in all religions, it involves difficulty. There has to be difficulty for the pilgrimage to be transformative. The same is true for the hajj. Now, in the time of my grandmother it would take you months to journey to Mekka on donkey's and camels. You might even die on the way. So the journey was the perilous thing. Today, it's a different story: you can do the journey first class by air but if you come away with your life out of two million people turning around the Ka'ba, you're lucky. So even though the journey has become radically different, the difficulty and danger has arisen in a different aspect of the pilgrimage. That's what I mean when I say that the principles will not change but according to the times, they will be different.

So the only progress that exists is spiritual progress.

But I'm actually talking about spiritual progress. I just wonder whether humanity as a whole can't be a bit like a single human being. And in that sense, yes, the human body decays, but the wisdom gained through life isn't supposed to.

No no. The Qur'an is very matter of fact about it. Some grow very old and eventually lose their senses. It's just life. And when you look at it like that, this business of progress becomes very childish.

I certainly can follow you a long way in your reasoning, but my problem with letting go completely of the progress idea because it would simply be an illusion, is the fact that it might lead to apathy. It might seem irrelevant to still fight injustice or to try to make things better for the people around us if we just accept all decay as 'natural'.

That's exactly what the Salafis or others critical of Sufism – or rather normative Islam – say. They claim that it leads to inactivity and complacency. But that is not the case. Look at Pakistan. The amount of charity people in Pakistan give is huge. Like I say, the real moral questions remain. Whether we're in a period of ascent or decay, we still have to take care of those around us.

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