A Humanist Message in Three Episodes and One Inconvenient Fact

PETER RONALD deSOUZA

At the outset let me say how honoured I am by the request to address the Indian Humanist Union, a full member of the International Humanist Union, on its 50th Anniversary. It is a singular privilege and a big responsibility. I do know that supernatural help has no place in a platform of the Humanist Union, but I would request you today for a temporary dispensation. Please allow me to invoke help from all quarters because the challenging task before me is to give a lecture that is appropriate for the 50th Anniversary of the Indian Humanist Union (IHU), and to speak in celebration of an idea, a movement, and an institution, requires such assistance. Such an anniversary lecture requires one to speak to a history, stretching from the Italian Renaissance, through the intellectual debates of the 18th and 19th centuries, to the three Humanist Manifestoes of 1933, 1973, and 2003. It requires one to speak to a philosophy of rationalism, empiricism and an ethical credo that is rooted in, and stems from, human need and interest, and finally to speak to a politics, committed to an open and participatory democracy which is regarded as the only system consistent with these Humanist goals. This task is a little daunting. A little supernatural help would do nicely!

Let me use an outflanking strategy to present my argument. Rather than analytically engage with the 17 aspects of the Humanist manifesto of 1973, which by itself is a powerful normative agenda, or even the 6 primary beliefs of the 2003 Humanist Manifesto, although it is tempting to do so since each of them is relevant to our times, let me begin the discussion by inviting you to reflect on something that occurred just a few weeks ago.

Please recall the recent episode of the 2010 Nobel Peace Prize. At the ceremony the Chair that was to be occupied by the 2010 laureate Lui Xiabo was kept vacant. Neither he, nor his wife, nor his friends, were permitted by the Chinese state to attend. For a risen China, wooed and courted by the world, to feel troubled by a mere intellectual, one of the authors of Charter 08 committed to democracy and human rights, such that it blocks all persons, close to and sharing an elective affinity with Liu Xiabo, from attending the award ceremony and more so using its monetary muscle to get countries to boycott the event – 17 fell in line – is really sad but not unexpected. But China's behavior is not what I want you to reflect upon. What I do, however, want to draw your attention to is the unwillingness of the Philippines to go to the award ceremony. Till the evening before the event it was unclear whether they would attend. But their attendance or not is immaterial to our analysis. What is germane to our reflection is the arguments given by the Philippines for their hesitation.

The President of the Philippines, Benigno Simeon Aquino III, whose reforms 7 out of 10 people supported at the time, implying high levels of regime legitimacy according to the newspapers, defended the Philippine government's initial decision to be absent from the Nobel ceremony on the grounds that it was for the 'protection of the interests of Filipinos'. When pressed by a newsman for justification he said, 'I put the Filipino first. If that is a sin, I will commit that sin over and over again.'[1] You will argue that this is realpolitik and for me to demand an ethical foreign policy from a popular head of state is just unrealistic. Political leaders do not act ethically but only tactically. If this is the law of politics then let me complicate the argument and remind you of an 'inconvenient fact'. President Aqunio's father Senator Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino was a staunch defender of Human Rights and a fierce critic of the authoritarian Marcos. His political life was a struggle for these beliefs. He was shot dead on August 21, 1983 as he stepped off the plane in Manila International Airport when he returned to his country despite advice from his friends who warned him that it was unsafe. He ignored their

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advice because he felt that he was needed in the deteriorating political situation in the Philippines. His death sparked off a huge protest movement against Marcos producing the political phenomenon of 'people's power' which returned the Philippines to democracy. And yet the martyred Senator's son, who one would expect would be deeply committed to the values of freedom and human rights for which his father gave his life, is now hesitant to celebrate an award to a person leading a similar movement for freedom and democratic rights.

What is the nature of the 'Filipino First' that President Aquino based his decision on when he initially instructed the Philippine Ambassador in Oslo to stay away from the award ceremony? Fear of standing up against an authoritarian regime? It is this pragmatism, a politics which sees everything in terms of supporting the winning not the principled side, a politics that allows a coalition *dharma* to acquire a pre-eminence over the key norms of a decent society when it caves in to the brinkmanship of its allies such as the Trinamool Congress, that the IHU must strive to challenge. The story that I have just narrated may seem trivial but to me it is symptomatic of a wider malaise to which all of us are not immune and hence we need to explore it more deeply since in the folds of the story lie lessons for us in India today. When will we draw the line? Where will we draw the Laxman Rekha? When will we reject the culture, which has come to define our public life, of abandoning our principles if the 'price is right'? Is this a genuine politics of ethical trade-off or is it politics of pragmatic opportunistic compromise? This is not a sanctimonious lament. I see it as an analytic challenge to the 'free thinkers' of the IHU. What did the son of a martyred senator, who fired the imagination of the Filipino people by his life in struggle for Human Rights and his death in defense of them, mean when he defended his action of not attending the award ceremony by saying 'I put the Filipino first'. Why was the 'Filipino first' of the father a different first? What is the rational calculus that produced in the son a decision that looks like a betrayal of his father's death? Assuming that he is being honest, what ethical trade-offs does power produce which the father did not have to do? Is there a clue in Yudhisthira's ambivalence when he informed Drona 'Ashwathama hatho naro wa kunjaro wa'? What is our dharma that we must follow in different situations, consistent or contingent, universal or context (as in time-space) determined? But let me leave this line of interrogation here and go to the three episodes that I want to talk about. The Philippine story is not one of them. I have narrated it here to introduce a contrast between it and the three episodes.

My chosen three episodes, in fact, tell the opposite story of ethical firmness, of political statespersons changing their world by their ethical resoluteness and not succumbing to the dynamics and 'reality' of the world. These are accounts not of ethical compromise but of ethical steadfastness. A Humanist Union must, in the best traditions of free and skeptical inquiry, work out the different political trajectories that this difference between 'ethical firmness' and 'ethical compromise' produces. This is its task. Should one be consistently resolute in the face of a fluid world with shifting frames of reference or should one be malleable and change one's position in a dynamic world? Is the other side of firmness, stubbornness, and the other side of flexibility, opportunism? On such fine and clear distinctions, and on such intellectual display of public reason is a decent society built.

The first episode, which I will present in chronological sequence, refers to Gandhiji's last fast. Let me here narrate it in D.G.Tendulkar's words recalling Gandhiji's words. It is a story that needs to be told and re-told in every 'gaon' and 'mohalla' so that we can reflect on its significance for us today:

> When on September 9th I returned to Delhi from Calcutta, it was to proceed to the West Punjab. But, that was not to be. Gay Delhi looked a city of the dead. As I alighted from the train, I observed a gloom on every face I saw. Even the Sardar whom humor and the joy that humor gives, never desert, was no exception, this time. The cause of it I did not know. The Sardar was on the platform to receive me. He lost no time in giving me the sad news of the disturbances that had taken place in the metropolis of the Indian Union. At once I realized that I had to be in Delhi and 'do or die'.... I yearn for heart friendship between the Hindus and the Sikhs and the Mussalmans. It subsisted between them only the other day. Today it is non-existent...

He then decided to fast on January 13th. The period was indefinite. It would end only when he was satisfied that there was a genuine 'reunion of hearts of all communities'... He begged all his friends not to dissuade him. He requested them not to tell him that things had been set right while the process was incomplete. He asked people to turn the searchlight within. A Central Peace Committee of 130 members representing all communities was formed and worked hard and honestly to fulfill Gandhiji's conditions. Peace returned on January 18th at 12:45 p.m. Gandhiji broke his fast. Again it is worth quoting at length from Tendulkar to convey the emotion of that moment, to convey not an extraordinary life (that it was) but the firmness of ethical purpose, a resoluteness that showed both the spirit behind the act but also the outcome produced by it. A metropolis gone mad returned to sanity. Collective action of a humanist kind replaced

collective action of the barbaric kind. I quote from Gandhiji's response:

Mr Gupta, speaking next, described touching scenes of fraternization between Hindus and the Muslims which he had witnessed when a procession of about 150 Muslims was taken out that morning in Sabzi Mandi and was received with ovation and offered fruit and refreshments by the Hindu inhabitants of that locality.

Gandhi said in reply that what they had told him had touched him deeply. Indeed, they had given him all that he asked for. But if their words meant that they held themselves responsible for the communal peace in Delhi only and what happened in other places was no concern of theirs, then their guarantee was worth nothing and he would feel that they too would one day realize that it was a great blunder on his part to have given up his fast. ... If they were sincere in their professions, surely, they could not be indifferent to outbreaks of madness in places other than Delhi.... If they could not make the whole of India realize that Hindus, Sikhs and Mussalmans were all brothers, it would bode ill for the future of both the dominions. What would happen to Hindustan if they quarreled with one another? Here Gandhi broke down with overwhelming emotion.

What were the elements of that 'overwhelming emotion'? There is something sacred about that moment, his deep yearning for as he said heart friendship – only Gandhi could coin such a term 'heart friendship' - for which he was prepared to die. The Humanist Union has to decode what this 'heart friendship' consists in, how it is brought about, who can subvert it and when, and who can nurture it and how? Gandhiji's fasts are full of moral learning. This last fast is about fraternity within communities in India and also Pakistan. That is its main message. But attached to it is a smaller story that can often be overlooked and missed in the backflow of the grander account.

The Government of India, owing to the dispute in Kashmir, had been withholding from the Government of Pakistan fifty-five crores of rupees which they had previously agreed to hand over to them as part of the division of assets of the whole of India. On the night of January 15, India decided to implement immediately the financial agreement with Pakistan 'to remove the one cause of suspicion and friction.

Gandhiji's last fast was also to put moral pressure on his own government. No tactical reasoning for him. He could not in all justice give confidence to his Pakistani friends if he accepted the Government of India's withholding of assets that were due. The refugees were enraged and shouted slogans outside Birla house, 'blood for blood', 'we want revenge', 'let Gandhi die'. But principle prevailed. And peace returned. In the face of the anger and distress of the refugees, the pain they had suffered because of partition, was Gandhiji's resoluteness, that the 55 crores due to them be given to Pakistan, a stubbornness difficult to justify, or was it in fact prompted by some higher principle of honesty and trust, that is at the core of our aspiration to build a decent future? As a person did Gandhi represent an ethical position that was not utilitarian? To get some light on these very complex and key questions let me now turn to the second episode.

On February 11, 1990 Nelson Mandela (affectionately called by his people Madiba) was released from Robben Island. He had spent 26 years in jail a majority of which was in solitary confinement. His daughter was born when he was in jail. His youth had been spent behind bars all because he believed in a democratic and free South Africa. Such a story of struggle against tyranny is not unusual and while I want to salute it, it is not from such heroism and courage that I want to draw my humanist lesson. Of course let me in no way, not even by hint, diminish the huge sacrifice and extraordinary commitment to freedom from apartheid that Madiba's life signifies. Even to mistakenly give that impression of diminishing the sacrifice would be perverse. But what I want to focus on here, and draw a humanist lesson from, is his first speech after his release. Through this one can get a sense of the man, the humanism that motivated him as it did Gandhi when we recall his last fast. In his biography *Long Walk to Freedom* he movingly talks about the approaching moment when he would be free. Again I will have to rely on the long quote to ensure that by paraphrasing it I would not sanitize it:

I did not dwell on the prospect of my release, but on all the many things I had to do before then. As so happens in life, the momentousness of an occasion is lost in the welter of a thousand details. There were numerous matters that had to be discussed and resolved with very little time to do so. A number of comrades from the reception committee, including Cyril Ramaphosa and Trevor Manuel, were in the house bright and early. I wanted initially to address the people of Paarl, who had been very kind to me during my incarceration, but the reception committee was adamant that that would not be a good idea: it would look curious if I gave my first speech to the prosperous white burghers of Paarl. Instead, as planned, I would speak first to the people of Cape Town at the Grande Parade in Cape Town.

First speech to the 'white Burghers' of Paarl by a black man who had been incarcerated by the apartheid regime, by a man who had entered prison a young man and was leaving it decades later without bitterness against the race that had supported the regime that had deprived him of his youth by putting him there. His people were in the townships. Their people were in the town hall. His people denied the public sphere, theirs in sole possession of it.

His people the victims of countless brutalities, theirs the perpetrators of it. And yet no bitterness. Not even a tinge of the desire for revenge. What did he want to do instead? Give his first speech to the white Burghers of Paarl. Was this just simplicity, a softness of the head come from many years in jail or was there an ethical frame of a higher order which would become apparent soon. It did. It was for solidarity between black and white. I quote from his first speech:

> We call on our white compatriots to join us in the shaping of a new South Africa. The freedom movement is a political home for you too... Our march to freedom is irreversible. We must not allow fear to stand in our way. Universal suffrage on a common voter's roll in a united democratic and non-racial South Africa is the only way to peace and racial harmony. In conclusion I wish to quote my own words during my trial in 1964. They are as true today as they were then: "I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.

This was his first public speech. Was this tactical reasoning or ethical resoluteness? Was this the big gesture that brought peace to South Africa that separated order from the impending chaos? In this first speech Madiba spoke of peace and racial harmony to the restless crowd who were perhaps yearning for revenge, longing for black majoritarianism. But Mandela's commitment to humanism ended that political possibility. He along with Bishop Desmond Tutu preached reconciliation and gave us a new instrument for healing the deep rift in a society torn apart by conflict, the 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'. It was this commitment to humanism that helped pull South Africa from the violence that threatened to engulf it, gave it a moral goal of reconciliation which would allow it to 'heal the wounds'. Quite an extraordinary act to cast aside his private suffering and speak and work for a higher morality of healing. The world needs such moral leadership again, not of the sanctimonious kind which only blames but of the uplifting kind which heals.

This brings me to the third episode for our Humanist reflections. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi spent 15 years under house arrest. She went to look after her mother in 1988 and entered politics by forming the National League for Democracy (NLD) after the brutal killing of 5000 demonstrators by the military regime on 8 August 1988. Since then she has become the symbol of resistance against the military dictatorship and was placed under house arrest. During this incarceration, and this is the tragic part, her husband who was living in England was diagnosed with a terminal case of prostrate cancer. The regime offered to release her and allow her to go to England to see him. But she refused fearing that if she left her country she would not be allowed to return. In this difficult dilemma, having to choose between her personal desire and her public duty, between the man she loved and the country she loved, she chose to stay back in Burma. Michael Aris passed away in 1999. She had last met him in 1988. On the day she left Michael noted:

> It was a quiet evening in Oxford, like many others, the last day in March 1988. Our sons were in bed and we were reading when the telephone rang. She picked up the phone to learn that her mother suffered a severe stroke. She put the phone down and started to pack. I had a premonition that our lives would change forever.[2]

William Hoge writes in the New York Times of 30 March 1999 that according to close friends Mr Aris was unflinchingly supportive of his wife's decision and never once complained that she should abandon the mission and come home. On what basis did she make her choice, first to look after her mother and then to look after her country. From the deep recesses of her soul, in a moment of great loneliness – a husband terminally ill, a nation in need of her – she chose to do her public duty. We need to debate whether it was a higher duty but we can certainly agree that it was a painful choice. And the family she loved so dearly had to bear the price of her commitment to a better world for her people. On 13 November 2010 she was released.

I began by indicating that I would adopt an outflanking strategy to reflect on the idea, the movement and the institution of the Indian Humanist Movement. I did not engage philosophically with the 17 aspects or the 6 primary beliefs. This is a task that needs to be done. Instead I have given three episodes and one inconvenient fact. Each has been accompanied by some questions to invite reflection on the choice between 'ethical firmness' and 'ethical compromise', a choice that we all make often in our lives. Each option produces a trail of consequences which these episodes so poignantly illustrate. Where will we place ourselves? In a fluid world we can pretend that the distinction is hard to make, that there is a grey area and a fuzzy boundary, and use that fuzziness to avoid taking a stand. That, I believe, is an abdication. It is easy to abdicate. Is that not the reason for our personal and national drift? Is that not why India today has every institution in the moral dock, from the judiciary, press, bureaucracy, academia, political parties to even our lowly panchayats. And yet I have given you instances when, in

more difficult situations, the bloodletting of partition, the ending of apartheid, and the tyranny of the military dictatorship, three extraordinary people made difficult and personally costly choices. Ethical resoluteness triumphed over ethical compromise.

One last reflection. The humanist message can be read in the big events and also in the little stories. Gandhiji's fast against the madness that had gripped the nation, Mandela's speech on reconciliation and Aung San Suu Kyi's protest against the military dictatorship are the big episodes and offer big lessons for our humanist reflections. But do not ignore the small story, fifty five crore rupees to be given to Pakistan that was withheld unjustly, the proposed first speech to the Burghers of Paarl, the acceptance that she would never see her husband again, these too have a humanist message. We need to examine, them with all the tools at our command. What was the basis for their choices? How did they decide what costs they were willing to bear which were worthwhile? And years later, when they looked back, how did they see these choices? We need to probe the inner world of these three persons because it is in this inner world where the decisions are made and where the sense of what is worthwhile is so carefully crafted. From this depth of understanding will come a humanism for our times. Through it will emerge the moral resources we need to build another possible world.

Notes

1. www.gmanews.tv/story/208199/aquino-no-need-to-justify-PHL-absence-atnobel-rites. 13/12/2010.
2. Aung San Suu Kyi: *Freedom From Fear, and Other Writings*. Edited with an introduction by Michael Aris, (New York and London: Penguin Books), 1991, p. vxii.

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