

“The Cartoon War” of Humiliation versus Humiliation: What Should be Done?

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Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies (www.humiliationstudies.org), the global network of academics and practitioners that I have founded, currently receives many emails asking our group to give our opinion as to what many call “The Cartoon War.” This “war” has been triggered by Danish Cartoons of Prophet Muhammad. The caricatures include drawings of Muhammad wearing a headdress shaped like a bomb, while another shows him saying that paradise was running short of virgins for suicide bombers.

“Some have labeled these cartoons ‘the straw that broke the camel’s back.’ Muslims, here [in the US] and abroad feel they are routinely and purposely humiliated,” writes Sarah Sayeed in *A Joke Gone Awry* (10th February 2006, <http://www.humiliationstudies.org/news/archives/000981.html>).

The timeline unfolded as follows (quoted from <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/4670370.stm>):

- 30 Sept: Danish paper Jyllands-Posten publishes cartoons
- 20 Oct: Muslim ambassadors in Denmark complain to Danish PM
- 10 Jan: Norwegian publication reprints cartoons
- 26 Jan: Saudi Arabia recalls its ambassador
- 30 Jan: Gunmen raid EU's Gaza office
- 31 Jan: Danish paper apologises
- 1 Feb: Papers in France, Germany, Italy and Spain reprint cartoons

This timeline does not end here. Violent protests have erupted all around the Muslim world since.

Please let me share with you my reflections that derive from more than twenty years of international therapeutic experience coupled with the social psychological research on humiliation that I began in 1996. My four-year doctoral research project was entitled, *The Feeling of Being Humiliated: A Central Theme in Armed Conflicts. A Study of the Role of Humiliation in Somalia, and Rwanda/Burundi, Between the Warring Parties, and in Relation to Third Intervening Parties* (Lindner, 2000, University of Oslo). My book

Making Enemies Unwittingly: Humiliation and International Conflict, will be published soon (Lindner, 2006, Westport, CT: Praeger).

Michio Kaku (2005), renowned physicist, concludes his book on *Parallel Worlds* with the following paragraph:

The generation now alive is perhaps the most important generation of humans ever to walk the Earth. Unlike previous generations, we hold in our hands the future destiny of our species, whether we soar into fulfilling our promise as a type I civilization or fall into the abyss of chaos, pollution, and war. Decisions made by us will reverberate throughout this century. How we resolve global wars, proliferating nuclear weapons, and sectarian and ethnic strife will either lay or destroy the foundations of a type I civilization. Perhaps the purpose and meaning of the current generation are to make sure that the transition to a type I civilization is a smooth one. The choice is ours. This is the legacy of the generation now alive. This is our destiny (Michio Kaku, 2005, *Parallel Worlds: A Journey Through Creation, Higher Dimensions, and the Future of the Cosmos*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday, p. 361).

In other words, humankind is at a tipping point. We might “make it,” or not. Imagine that the current situation of planet Earth resembles the Titanic an hour before she sank. Imagine, we still have a tiny chance to save ourselves, if we find good strategies quickly and implement them wisely. In order to achieve this, we need calm and mature discussions among ourselves to find good solutions, and sound cooperation to implement them. The least we need are “Cartoon Wars.” “Cartoon wars” take our attention and energy away from the pressing challenges for the world that we have to solve. Therefore “Cartoon Wars” are life-threatening for all humankind. The world cannot afford “Cartoon Wars,” particularly not in times of emergency.

Given the fact that humankind finds itself in an emergency situation that can only be tackled with global cooperation, anything that hampers this cooperation is a step backwards. And “Cartoon Wars” are a big step backwards.

Kaku’s type I civilizations points at the same vision that philosopher Avishai Margalit describes in his book *The Decent Society*, where he calls for societies to build institutions that no longer humiliate their citizens (Margalit 1996, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

I call for a *decent global village* harnessed by a *Moratorium on Humiliation*. I believe that there is an extremely important role for the international community which needs to become more active and facilitate constructive social change towards a *decent global village*, which includes all citizens of the world in dignified ways.

What should be done?

In the following, I suggest that we have to

- cool down

- avoid the pitfalls of victimhood
- learn moderation
- and, finally, avoid bias and become aware of our commonalities by defining ourselves as one family of humankind.

We have to cool down

Feelings can be hot or cold. We humans have a hot “go” system and a cool “know” system. The cool “know” system is cognitive, complex, contemplative, slow, strategic, integrated, coherent, and emotionally rather neutral. It is the basis of self-regulation and self-control. The hot “go” system is impulsive and reflexive and undermines rational attempts at self-control. It causes “tunnel vision,” reducing the range of one’s perceptions, thoughts, and choices, risking that we take suboptimal decisions.

In other words, the hot “go” system represents a double-edged sword. It may save us from immediate danger, when we need to run or fight. However, in case of a complex conflict, it easily operates malignly.

Feelings of humiliation are among the hottest feelings. Feelings of humiliation represent the “nuclear bomb of the emotions” (this is a term that I have coined).

I began my research on humiliation in 1996, when I asked myself the following questions: “What is the strongest obstacle to peace, to social cohesion, and to willingness to cooperate in our newly emerging interdependent world? What is the strongest force that disrupts, creates fault lines, and fuels destructive conflict?”

Feelings of humiliation, is my answer. Feelings of debasement may lead to acts of humiliation perpetrated on the perceived humiliator, setting off cycles of humiliation in which everybody who is involved feels denigrated and is convinced that humiliating the humiliator is a just and holy duty.

In order for feelings of humiliation to be expressed in mass movements, leaders are required, who channel the sufferings of masses into one single joint project of expression. Yet, leaders alone can do nothing. Leaders need a pool of feelings of humiliation among the masses on which they can draw, a pool that is “hot” enough.

Fear and humiliation have the potential to link up in particularly disastrous ways. In Rwanda, for example, fear of future humiliation, based on the experience of past humiliation, was used as justification for genocide.

To conclude, we are well advised to cool down when we experience hot feelings, including feelings of humiliation, in order to avoid disastrous “tunnel vision.” Likewise, we should help our opponents in conflicts to calm down.

We have to avoid the pitfalls of victimhood

Philosopher Avishai Margalit suggests that some people may become attached – almost addicted – to feeling humiliated, as this secures the “benefits” of the victim status and an entitlement for retaliation (Margalit, 2002, *The Ethics of Memory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

Similarly, Arie Nadler shows that victimhood may serve as an “exemption” from having to take responsibility for being a perpetrator (Nadler, 2002b, Social-psychological analysis of reconciliation: Instrumental and socio-emotional routes to reconciliation, in Salomon, Gavriel and Nevo, Baruch (Eds.), *Peace Education Worldwide: The Concepts, Underlying Principles, and Research*, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum).

Jennifer S. Goldman and Peter T. Coleman posit that a humiliated person might feel morally justified to act aggressively against others:

“To give up the status as a humiliated person would mean that the aggression would no longer be morally justified, and no further pleasure or catharsis could be derived from it. It would also mean having to face the reality of one’s own perpetration, and one’s own responsibility for the other’s pain” (Goldman and Coleman, 2005, *How Humiliation Fuels Intractable Conflict: The Effects of Emotional Roles on Recall and Reactions to Conflictual Encounters*, New York, NY: International Center for Cooperation & Conflict Resolution, Teachers College, Columbia University, manuscript submitted for publication, pp. 15-16).

Not only can victimhood be abused to provide justifications for acting aggressively, it also tends to hamper self-reflection. Further down, I will explain how “Cartoon Wars” are the result of misreadings across out-groups. Recognizing this requires self-reflection. Victims often do not reflect on their own constructions of reality but feel vindicated to regard their take on the situation to be “the only truth” even when it would alleviate their victimhood to also consider other views.

To conclude, victimhood has the potential to foster more victimhood. And since feelings of humiliation are exceptionally hot, they might turn our world into a world full of victims. Do we want that?

We have to learn moderation

The defining characteristic of moderates is that they are capable of rising above the level of opposing sub-groups to perceive all players as fellow participants in *One single larger in-group*.

Extremists, in contrast, are those most mired in humiliation, both as feelings and retaliating acts, and they deepen the rifts of hatred instead of healing humiliation.

Conflicts are often embedded into an angry atmosphere of “We have to stand united against the ‘enemy’!” This sentence would be interpreted by extremists to mean, “We have to eliminate the ‘enemy.’” In contrast, a moderate would say, “We protect ourselves best by working towards a larger *we* in a constructive manner, to include among *us* those we today call ‘enemies’.” These interpretations usually compete, with the more “hot” and emotional interpretation usually being more extremist and promising fast redemption for painful feelings. Moderation is much more difficult to “sell” and needs the support of a larger group of people to gain weight and credibility.

A shining example of a moderate is Nelson Mandela. He succeeded in transforming his feelings of humiliation after 27 years of prison into a constructive contribution to social and societal change. He distanced himself from his own urge for revenge. However, a Mandela is seldom available. Moderation may then be best provided by third parties who are not involved in the conflict and committed to safeguarding social cohesion in a respectful manner and without humiliating any participant. The involved opponents’ feelings are often too hot to be moderate, at least during conflict peaks. Sometimes an overpowering force of moderates may be needed, especially when the conflict has organized itself into political movements led by extremist leaders.

If we leave the world arena to our extremists, we will reap global mayhem. The world is no longer a place where conflicts can be contained locally: the entire world can be set on fire, much easier than ever before. And the world is moreover no longer defined by nations and diplomats. Every single world citizen is a player. Everybody can transform, quite easily, into a weapon of mass destruction. Mohamed Atta, who flew a plane into the Twin Towers in New York, was no diplomat declaring war on behalf of a country. Therefore, if global mayhem shall be averted, every single citizen of this world is called upon to transform into a moderate.

To conclude, mature, moderate, responsible people need to invite everybody to emulate the example of a Nelson Mandela and not to follow promoters of violence who have translated feelings of humiliation into an urge to retaliate with violence. Moderates of all conflict parties and from all third parties carry the responsibility for curbing extremism and inviting their representatives into the camp of moderation, where we all together search for sustainable solutions in a patient and collaborative effort and cooperate for their implementation.

We have to avoid the destructive outfalls of bias

“Cartoon Wars” are the outfall of misunderstandings, misreadings and misconceptions due to the human tendency to view the world through the lens of bias as soon as in-groups define themselves against out-groups. And “Cartoon Wars” are moreover due to a lack of understanding for what ought to be humankind’s priorities.

In the face of global emergencies, humankind ought to conceive of itself as *one single family*. However, still, many conceptualize the world as being divided into in-groups

pitted against out-groups. The problem is that whenever the world is constructed in such a way, people fall prey to a host of biases.

Phenomena such as the *false polarization effect*, which makes us underestimate what we have in common with out-groups, or the so-called *attribution error* are central. The *attribution error* describes the human tendency to believe that our successes are ours, while our failures are due to adverse circumstances; this evaluation is turned into its opposite when others are judged. Others’ successes are perceived as due to favorable circumstances, while only their failures are theirs.

As a result, every member in what are out-groups for me, whenever they hear how self-serving I view the world, feels humiliated. As long as groups lived rather separate from each other on our planet, my in-group bias did not harm; it only strengthened my belonging to “my people.” However, at the present historic point in time, the world grows to be interdependent. Today, my out-groups get to know my in-group bias. And my self-serving in-group bias becomes deeply hurtful to them. Not enough, my bias also blinds me to what we have in common.

Solomon Ash (1907-1996) was a pioneer in studying biases such as *reactive devaluation*. Reactive devaluation means that any proposition for compromise that is put forward by an out-group is rejected, regardless of its contents, while the own group’s arguments are regarded by its members with sympathy, merely because they come from within the group.

As a result, even the best solution is rejected: I cannot embrace your proposal, even if it is marvelous and totally I agree, because I would betray my in-group.

To conclude, the destructive outfall of in-group/out-group biases is that urgently needed efforts to find joint solutions to destructive conflict are hampered. There are mainly two problems. Firstly, the involved parties are incapacitated in their efforts to cooperate on finding and implementing good solutions, due to mutual feelings of humiliation and due to blindness as to the fact that we all have more in common than we think. Secondly, urgently needed good solutions are rejected. Therefore, humankind has to learn to avoid in-group/out-group biases.

Our commonalities need to be our priority, not our differences

In 1994, I wrote my doctoral dissertation in social medicine on the topic of quality of life. I asked Egyptians and Germans “What is a good life for you?” (Lindner, 1994, *Quality of Life: A German-Egyptian Comparative Study*, Hamburg: Department of Psychological Medicine, University of Hamburg). What I found was that all have in common the wish for society to be cohesive and harmonious. All desire a world in which their children can prosper and be happy. The difference was that *secular distance to religion* was seen as a *guarantor* for social cohesion by many of my German interview partners, while the Egyptian interviewees saw secular distance to religion precisely as a *hindrance* to a “good life.” In other words, all parties wish for society to offer a good future to their children, but they differ on the methods; religious beliefs are seen in opposing ways, either as a beneficial force that holds society together, or as a potential divider.

In the case of the “Cartoon Wars” all sides feel that their most noble beliefs are being exposed to humiliation, namely their vision for a world that offers a good life to their children. All participants feel deeply hurt and humiliated. All sides regard the others’ attacks as evil. Muslims imagine that the cartoons are part of a “Western” conspiracy against Islam, and in the West, many construe the situation to mean that Muslims wish to attack “our freedom.” Both sides are wrong. Both endanger world peace with views that are the result of biases such as the above-discussed false polarization effect, attribution error and reactive devaluation, which obscure that we all wish for the same, a world that is livable for future generations.

If we focus on our commonalities, we can reconcile and cooperate. How do we do that?

I personally reply to the question “Where are you from?” with the following sentence, “I am from planet Earth, I am a living creature, I am a human being, like you.” I define Arab history to be as much to be “my history” as European history or American history. “My history” is all humankind’s history.

This means that I carry the shame and disgust for all the destruction that has ever been caused in the course of its history by humankind. I feel responsible for not repeating what Stalin did, or Hitler, or any other dictator. I wish to carry the responsibility for doing something about it when it happens again, wherever on the planet it might occur.

In the same spirit I feel proud of all the achievements of humankind, of all the great literature, art and wisdom that have emerged all over the globe. I feel responsible for protecting and celebrating the cultural diversity of this world, however, only as long as it is not divisive. I wish to let go of cultural aspects that can only be kept alive through violence.

The first paragraph of Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 10, 1948, reads: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” If we wish to give life to this motto, we need to build a world of *decent global inter-human relations*,

relations that give second priority to inter-national relations or inter-cultural relations, and not vice versa. Land, nations, ethnic or religious group delineations should not provide the essence of our identity to us, lest we wish to open the door for the malignancies of in-group/out-group biases and their potentially disastrous consequences.

When we delineate the essence of our identity as belonging to in-groups whose definition depends on human out-groups, we give tyrants potential hate-tickets: what do we do when we are told that we betray our country or our group when we do not kill? Hutus had to prove their “Hutuness” by killing Tutsis and a Serb killed his wife when she was not Serb.

Identity built on land, nation, ethnic or religious delineations precludes what we need most when we wish to cooperate for building a better world: in-group trust. The maximum one can obtain with out-groups are alliances. In-group/out-group delineations are like foot-binding. They incapacitate the world. Instead, we need to highlight our commonalities, they are more important than our differences, when we wish to cooperate. Humankind has to learn what ought to be their priority: their commonalities, and not their differences.

The solution

Today, 12 million children die each year before they are 5 years old, of preventable diseases and poverty. I choose to feel responsible. Global over-exploitation of resources and the destructive effects of the way we use our resource makes our world unlivable for coming generations. I choose to feel responsible.

The world believes that Germans during World War II ought to have stood *up* and not stood *by* when Jews were transported away. 6 million people died in the Holocaust.

I, personally, do not want to stand by in today’s world. I want to stand up. We live in an *undignified* and *ramshackle global village* where millions suffer. In order to stand up, I identify with all humankind as “my family.” *I have made the global village my home and all its citizens my family. I try to do whatever I can to protect my family and I hope you are joining me.*

Diversity, be it religious, national, cultural or ethnic diversity, can be the source of unparalleled inspiration and enrichment for the world. However, diversity can only be enriching – as opposed to being divisive – when it is embedded into respect for equal dignity for all people and an awareness that we, all humanity, must cooperate to protect ecological and social sustainability for coming generation.

Humankind is currently coming together into an ever shrinking world. However, coming closer does not always render love. Feelings of humiliation emerge when respect is felt to be failing. Feelings of humiliation may lead to turning the cycle of humiliation another turn by retaliating with acts of debasement as response for feeling debased.

The example of Nelson Mandela shows alternative ways out of feelings of debasement – away from cycles of humiliation and towards constructive social change. Nelson Mandela shows that there is no automatic link between feeling humiliated and retaliating with acts of humiliation. Mandela shows that wounds from debasement cannot serve as a “justification” or “excuse” for mayhem. Mandela’s example proves that strong constructive leadership is what remedies the agony that emanates from being forced into indignity, not inflicting wounds in return.

The important fault lines in conflicts are not those that separate Israelis from Palestinians, Hutus from Tutsis, Sinhalese from Tamils, or Christians from Muslims. There is only one important fault line – the division between extremists and moderates in all camps. If extremists gain access to power, they will polarize and deepen whatever rifts they can feed on. Social peace, locally and globally, is only secured if moderates outweigh extremists. Extremist stances do not heal, they exacerbate the problem. It is essential for those who feel to be victims to avoid being drawn into extremist camps. This is what victims can do for a peaceful world.

Once a situation has been overrun by extremists and their polarizing language, moderates face almost insurmountable problems. Moderate Hutus were killed by extremist Hutus in the 1994 genocide. Extremist tyrants usually eliminate critics from their own camp first. Moderates in such a dilemma have only one option, to gather as many allies as possible from the global third party, the international community, to give weight to moderate positions, to help dampen extremist language and to forge alliances of moderates across all opposing camps.

The coming-into-being of the *global village* facilitates this process as it becomes increasingly apparent that it is in everybody’s interest to extinguish extremist fires wherever they burn, before they engulf the whole *global village*.

For a third party such as the international community, promoting moderation means supporting and advocating leaders such as a Mandela. It means continuously emphasizing our children’s future, a future that nobody wishes to be bloody and violent. These crucial elements give power to moderation and have the potential to outweigh extremist voices.

The protection of “my people” is best secured by working for global social sustainability, not against any supposed “enemies.” Everybody, who wishes for social peace in the *global village* is called upon to promote moderation and maturity in the face of the hot feelings that tempt people to lash out against “enemies” instead of working for the social cohesion of humankind as a whole.

Gandhi disliked the words and ideas of “passive resistance.” The term Satyagraha (non-violent action), is a combination of satya (truth-love) and agraha (firmness/force). Satyagraha encapsulates the intertwining of firmness with respect. Human dignity is only safeguarded by firm moderation. And firm moderation means tough dialogue; it does neither mean refusal of dialogue nor does it mean appeasement: Understanding

humiliation does not automatically mean condoning violent urges to retaliate, listening does not necessarily mean agreeing, and reaching out for dialogue has nothing to do with appeasement. The world needs Nelson Mandelas who are capable of mature moderation that is both inclusive-respectful and tough.

I call for a *decent global village* harnessed by a *Moratorium on Humiliation*. You and me, the entire international community, everybody, needs to become more active and facilitate constructive social change towards a *decent global village*, which includes all citizens of the world in dignified ways.