

# Walls and Peace

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Ordinarily walls represent security. Security from extreme weather, hot or cold, security from sudden hostile intrusion and security from unwanted company. Walls are just like extended clothes. We are naked inside our clothes and within the confines of the walls of our rooms we can shed our clothes and, if we want, we can look at ourselves to our hearts' content. Walls are also built to keep secure our treasures, personal or communal. We are so convinced of the usefulness of walls that whenever we feel insecure or threatened we tend to build a wall or a barrier. Now these walls may not be the usual brick and cement walls. They may be ideological walls raised to keep out an unacceptable ideology a certain trend or whatever we fancy or fear. In the following lines I plan to talk about walls, seen and unseen, and their effects on humanity. Some walls can trigger a plan for burglary, an invasion, and some can trigger violence/terrorism, religious or secular. I hope to be able to point to ways of avoiding friction caused by differences of religious beliefs and to ways of avoiding friction caused by the feeling of being oppressed.

The trouble with the walls is that on the one hand they can be a challenge to the outsiders and on the other hand their very strength often proves to be our undoing. To see this note that positioned in a heavily fortified fortress we might feel strong and invincible but a lot of such fortresses fell open when the siege prolonged, or bigger guns were brought in. History tells us that when a certain city relied on walls to keep out invaders, the invaders came up with devices to fell or circumvent (climb or tunnel under) the walls. For stronger walls, later, there were bigger and more efficient devices to bring them down or to circumvent them. In the face of the fear of being branded wordy I observe that apparently where there is a wall there is a will to look past it, or to take it down. Meaning, it is in our nature to be curious and it is in our nature to be resentful when we are left out. If we see that someone in our neighborhood has built a good-looking house that is all walled in with a big gate, we would want to know what is inside. If the owner were the openhearted kind he/she would invite the neighbors in and show them around. If the owner were someone who wanted it all to himself/herself there would be speculation about his/her source of wealth and the lawless among the neighborhood would want to make sure that the owner pays for the secrecy.

The same is true with other barriers; you raise one and there would be folks to oppose it from within or without. The Romans created a barrier against assimilating people from the “conquered lands” and caused so much bad blood that in the end it caused splits in the empire. While the first of the two great wars of the past century was a classic example of the walls crumbling under their own weight, the second of these wars is a supreme example of violence as a result of walling out a growing industrial might. Of course Hitler did not win in World War II, but left a lesson that you cannot wall out a growing power and expect peace. Nixon did well to open dialogue with China and I hope the Security Council would increase the number of its permanent members and would do away with the notion of “veto power”. The veto power represents an oppressive barrier, between the haves and have-nots. Those who pay so much lip service to World Peace should realize that when a permanent member vetoes, it imposes its limited wisdom upon the collective wisdom of the world. Now it seems that John Kerry has the right idea that if North Korea wants we should have bilateral talks with them. I think this idea should be pursued, whatever the outcome of the election. I have a feeling that the wall here is the feeling on the part of the current administration that “North Korea is such an insignificant country”. Of course the North Koreans sense that and hence their insistence.

Let me also point out that the existence of a wall is not always bad, nor is our wish to look past a wall. Our wish to look past a barrier has made us climb mountains, discover new lands, discover new facts. Often a problem presents itself as a wall, which must be climbed, felled or circumvented. Once we have done that we end up with a sense of victory and personal accomplishment, recognition may come as a reward but that usually is not the main objective. In Science and technology walls are felled when we think objectively and are willing to input all our resources to find an answer to our question whatever it may be. Noting that in Scientific pursuits objective approach often leads to success we may apply similar methods to solving problems created by walls.

Another problem with the walls is that they have this bad habit of becoming useless, obsolete or coming crashing down, actually or metaphorically. The Great Wall of China might have served some purpose when it was built, but it could not keep the Mongols out, for long. The Great Wall of China

remains, but just as a wonder as a relic of the past. In modern days, soon after the Berlin Wall came crashing down, Israel is planning to build one of its own. I think it is legitimate that a country should wall out some folks for fear of terrorism, as Israel is doing. But before they do erect the wall they should consider if they are (or the world is) causing the terrorist activity by keeping the Palestinians helpless and poor. If, after the wall is completed, the Palestinians are still living in squalor as they are living now with restricted foreign aid, damaged industry (or whatever they have in the name of industry) and agriculture, then the wall would only make them look for more efficient ways of hitting back. (Of course the Israelis and the world have no intention of improving the lot of the Palestinians, recently Israel has acquired smart bombs from the US.) On the other hand the Palestinians have a wall of their own, they blame all of their ills on the Zionists. If they demolish this wall of hate and resolve to make a fresh start, by curbing rampant corruption within a few years they would be so prosperous that the Jews would dare not look down upon them. The Israeli-Palestinian equation is a tricky one; both sides of the equation think the other side is not equal. The Israelis think they have a right to “defend” themselves after all the suffering in the holocaust and the Palestinians think it is their land and so they are right to struggle against a foreign implant. In my opinion, this “non-equation” is a barrier and it will remain so unless both Israelis and Palestinians join hands to demolish it.

Enough about the material walls let us talk some more about the unseen walls. Often hard to describe and often a part of the blame game. These walls are often based on ignorance, cultivated or actual or misinformation, actual or acquired. Recently I read an article written by David G. Littman entitled: *Teaching hatred in Saudi Arabia and Egypt: The UN response*. This article appeared on “FrontPage magazine.com ” (October 1, 2004). In this article the author laments that Saudis and the Egyptians are teaching hatred, in their schools, about other religions and even other sects of Islam. In this regard I would say that I have heard stories about Saudis being intolerant, even harsh to non-Arab foreigners, part of it could be blamed on language barrier. But about Egyptians I am truly surprised, they have had good relations with the West. I must say that Islam actually teaches religious tolerance. The Quran has this to say (Ch 18 Verse 30,31): *And say, it is the truth from your Lord; wherefore let him who will, believe, and let him, who will, disbelieve. Verily, We have prepared for the wrongdoers a fire whose flaming canopy shall enclose them. And if they cry for help, they will be helped with like molten lead, which would scald their faces. How dreadful*

*the drink and how evil the resting place! Verily, those who do good works – surely We suffer not the reward of those who do good works to be lost.* So, the Author of the Quran tells us to not interfere with the beliefs of people and keeps the right to punish or reward them to Himself. So if a Muslim hates or punishes others for the difference in faith he should read his Quran again.

Religious tolerance is a very good thing, but tell me what religion has followers who say that other religions are complete and true? Let's face it; it is not just the Muslims, who appear to be intolerant. You are a Jew because you think that in Judaism is your salvation and all else is false. You are a Christian, because you think Christ is the only savior, meaning all that does not point to Jesus, is false. If you are a Muslim, you invariably think Islam is the only true and complete religion. If a Muslim ignores the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet, he starts believing that his belief is the only one true belief and everyone else will go to Hell. If you dig deeper that is the case for the adherents of every religion or ism. The reason seems to be that to live we humans need to believe that we are right.

Inherent in the lament of Littman is the claim that Jews and Christians teach religious tolerance to their children. Well good for them, but then show me a single Jew who believes in the immaculate birth of Jesus, as claimed by the Christians and as believed by the Muslims. The best the Jews have come up with is "perhaps he was fathered by a Roman soldier" which is a roundabout way of saying that Jesus was, God forbid, an illegitimate child. I can understand that given the sexual promiscuity in the West, especially among the Christians, a reaction to the allegation that a Roman soldier fathered Jesus has lost its punch but it still is an insensitive thing to say. Similarly, a Christian or a Jew is bound to believe that Muhammad was an imposter for if he does not, then he is bound to accept Muhammad. Muslims, on the other hand regard the Jews as ones who incurred the anger of God and the Christians as confused (gone astray). So, it is in the nature of things. These are the walls we will have to live with, as long as there are different religions.

Then there are walls created by our insecurities, which are compounded by lack of knowledge. Recently, Larry King of CNN was interviewing Yusuf Islam (former Cat Stevens). Larry asked Yusuf, if Quran attacks Judaism. In reply Yusuf told Larry that the Quran does not attack Judaism, in fact the Quran promises a fair treatment to righteous Jews and Christians. From my

standpoint Quran completes Judaism and all other religions, so there is no question of attacking Judaism, Christianity or any other religion for that matter. However the Quran does point out where the Jews and the Christians deviated from the path and the Quran does come out strong against idol worship. (My personal belief is that God loves us all and so He sent His prophets to all the nations; some people went too far away and started worshipping idols.) The Quran also points out that some folks inserted, for gain, in the previous holy books. What adds to the insecurity is this wall created by the ignorant Muslim Mullahs who say that Jihad is just fighting the non-Muslims. Jihad essentially means struggle, struggle to be a righteous and God-fearing person, struggle to be free from want and need, struggle to overcome an enemy who threatens the Muslim Faith. The Quran exhorts Muslims to fight for Allah with their wealth and with their lives when there is war against Islam. But in the peacetime the Quran orders Muslims to honor treaties and to care about the sensitivities of other peoples. (It would be instructive to read Chapter 49 of the Quran.)

I think it would be a good idea to get hold of a Mullah who considers terrorism Jihad, sit him with some moderate Muslim scholars and ask him for his reasons and let those scholars refute those reasons one by one. Then do the same with a Christian priest who supports the idea that the “Prince of Peace” will reign after the bloody war and confront him with moderate Christian scholars. Then of course there is no dearth of Rabbis who want to do what Joshua did to the philistines to keep the land of milk and honey. I really feel like saying, again, that it is in the nature of things. The life has become so fast paced that ordinary folks do not have enough time for religion. This leaves religious knowledge in the hands of paid clergy who must say something to justify their existence. So they come up with statements that point to the ultimate superiority or success of their religion. This contributes to the walls of misconceptions, which in the end lead to friction.

Now, the unseen walls that our religious affiliations have built around us are extremely difficult to get rid of, unless we decide to do away with the religion altogether. But getting rid of religion is easier said than done. Even those who say, and act to indicate, that they do not care about religion have a soft spot in their hearts for some religious affiliations. So, the only way left for us is to work out an approach that allows us to live peacefully with other religions, staying within our walls if we want to. This actually means that we will have to face our demons and come up with a comprehensive plan of

making the world a peaceful place. One way of doing this is to call a number of multi-religion conferences all over the globe in which scholars of each religion present the best aspects of their religion and talk about the sensitivities of the followers of that religion. It may be made clear that this is not a comparison, so no attacks on other religions, yet questions can be asked about a religion and answered by the followers of the same religion. If we honestly want peace, these conferences, if properly publicized, will provide us with a, hopefully small, set of unwritten rules of religious tolerance that would not be hard to follow for anyone.

Once we know that all religions ultimately teach living in harmony with other humans, we will be much better prepared to handle mischief perpetrated in the name of any religion. My reasons for proposing this global awareness of other religions is that we humans have at our disposal enough destructive power to render the whole globe lifeless for a very long time, and in our heart of hearts we do not want to destroy what we have. So, why not try to remove misunderstandings before it is too late? Why not render religion unusable by the terrorists and mischief mongers? It would be a terrible shame if mischief mongers, who use the name of their Creator for waging wars, destroy the world, His creation. (I know that He will not let them succeed, but He has His own way of doing things.) I am not the first one to propose multi-religion conferences, for a similar conference in the past look up the notes at the end of this article.

Now religion is not the only cause of unseen walls going up. There are several races populating this little globe of ours, they differ in various physical attributes yet each has some reason to be proud. Then there are different language blocks. Sometimes these racial and linguistic differences become walls. Such walls too can cause friction and strife; they have in the past and the present is no exception. While Al-Qaida is earning a bad name for Islam all over the world there are other terrorist activities going on, some in the name of freedom and some in the name of a separate homeland. Although such activities may not be considered as serious as the religion based terrorism, they do result in the damage of property and life. In most of these cases the wall is the inability “to see the problem” on the part of the party with an advantage. In my opinion, the countries that have separatist movements should try education and negotiations and failing these, they should try referendum. Not always but often enough, a minority picks up a cause and starts causing disturbances. Negotiations do not work because the government does not see the “problem” as a problem, but the bloodshed

goes on. In such situations I recall the example of Canada, where a large chunk of population, mostly living in Quebec, speak French. The Canadians faced a violent separatist movement, in Quebec in the late 1960s and early 70s. In 1968, the Official Languages Bill was passed. This bill encouraged bilingualism in the federal civil service. In the end there was a referendum in 1980 and Quebec decided not to leave the federation after all. Now, not all problems may be as “simple” as that, but an objective approach will always help.

I would like to conclude by saying that usually walls mark the lines of separation. We like to live with some of these lines of separation because they provide us a sense of security and we have to live with some lines of separation because they define who we are. The walls are not good or bad in themselves, what makes them good or bad is our approach to them. Let us not make these lines of separation a reason for oppressing others. Is it too hard to realize that we are, each of us, on this globe for a brief sojourn? So, if we cannot make it pleasant for each other let us at least try not to make it unpleasant.

## Notes and reference

1. I am not the first one to suggest multi-religion conferences. There have been others, albeit with different aims. For instance in December 1896 a Conference of Great Religions was held in Lahore (then India). Swami Sadhu Shugan Chandra who proposed and made this conference possible wrote the following lines to put across the need for such conferences:  
*If a person sees another suffering from a fatal disease, and he believes that he holds the cure for the disease, and he also claims to have sympathy for the human race, then how is it possible for him to intentionally turn away when called upon to provide a remedy? My heart is filled with the desire to know which religion is the one replete with the truth. I have not the words to express my fervor.*

I found this passage in a book, which goes on to say:

*Representatives of various religions accepted Swami Sahib's invitation, and the Conference of Great Religions was held during the Christmas holidays of 1896. Each of the speakers was required by the committee to address five questions published in advance by the committee. The committee also stipulated that, as far as possible, each speaker should confine his answers to the holy book of his religion.*

*The questions were:*

1. *The physical, moral and spiritual states of man.*
2. *What is the state of man after death, i.e. hereafter?*
3. *What is the true purpose of man on earth and how can it be achieved?*
4. *What are the effects of one's deeds in this life and the afterlife?*
5. *What are the sources of divine knowledge?"*

You can find all this and much more in an introduction to: *The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam*, By Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, Islam International Publications Ltd., ISBN 1-85372-193-X. (*The Philosophy of the Teachings of Islam* was presented at the above-mentioned conference and was deemed as the most powerful presentation. It is good reading if you are interested in knowing about Islam.)

2. These ideas had been cooking for some time but I did not put pen to paper because I was afraid of being misunderstood. Now the urgency of the situation demands that I say my piece. I realized the urgency when I heard Mr. Bush say, "They attacked us" in one of those Presidential debates. My personal reaction was, "My God this man is ready to punish the whole Muslim World for what some mad men did!" Luckily Mr. Kerry was there to correct him by saying that it was Osama bin Ladin who attacked us and not Saddam, but that did not seem to be enough.