Applying the Golden Rule to Peace

Rather than making serious efforts at peace settlements, President Obama is skating toward possible U.S. involvement in two more Middle Eastern wars, with Syria and Iran. And ex-Vice President Cheney has no regrets about the Iraq War. Such attitudes ignore a core principle of all major religions, writes Winslow Myers.

By Winslow Myers

Sixty years ago, the psychoanalyst Erik Erikson gave a talk in India on the Golden Rule, a formulation that occurs, with some variation, in all the major religions. Judaism: “What is hateful to yourself, do not do to your fellow man.” Islam: “No one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother what he desires for himself.” Christianity: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Erikson’s theme was the creative potential of mutuality, between spouses, parents and children, doctors and patients, teachers and pupils, even between nations. Mutuality, Erikson asserted, is a relationship in which partners depend upon each other for the enhancement of their respective strengths. The curiosity of a student elicits from the teacher the skills for transmitting the excitement of learning in a way that benefits both teacher and student.

In the case of nations, fear of Hobbesian chaos if leaders relax their futile race toward military superiority makes it difficult to encourage mutuality. Ruthless power relations turn the life-giving spirit of mutuality on its head: do not even think of trying to destroy me because if you do I will destroy you.

This paranoia rationalizes the unabated manufacture of ever more destructive weaponry, irrespective of sensible policy goals, by ever more powerful corporations. As the vulgarism derived from the Golden Rule puts it, those with the gold make the rules.

The ersatz American idea of mutuality (adore us, obey us, give us your oil) has often resulted in tragedy, or tragic farce, viz. former Vice President Dick Cheney asserting recently regarding the Iraq War that given the chance to do it all over, he wouldn’t change a thing.

Is there anything that we have learned about the context of international relations in the years since Erikson gave his talk that might make his paradigm of mutuality not only more relevant but also more realistic? Can the Golden Rule become more persuasive than gold?
First, establishment strategists schooled in pitiless power politics like Henry Kissinger have come to the reluctant conclusion that nuclear weapons cannot serve as a useful tool for furthering anyone’s national interest. Kissinger’s boss Richard Nixon wanted to use them against North Vietnam, but was dissuaded lest other nuclear powers be drawn in.

Fortunately we were mature enough to accept defeat rather than suicidal escalation, and that restraint has continued. It may be a sign that we are gradually maturing beyond the folly of war altogether that most American wars since Vietnam, since Korea in fact, have been inconclusive stalemates.

When American, Israeli and Iranian diplomats, or their proxies, sit down to talk, do they simply threaten each other? Or do they hypothesize together what will inevitably occur down the time-stream if they fail to establish the basic trust upon which mutuality can be built?

Is it possible for them to help each other see the possibility of shared survival goals despite the chasm of divergent motives and stories? Can they acknowledge how other nations have already gone through the futile process of arming themselves to the point of being able to pound each other’s rubble, only to arrive, a few months before Erikson’s long-ago talk, at the Cuban Missile Crisis?

Do they share with each other the reality that the detonation of only a few nuclear weapons has the potential to cause nuclear winter, endangering not just specific parties to conflict but the planet as a whole?

The second basis for mutuality even between enemies, following upon the realization that anything else leads to nuclear extinction, is the model of mutuality found in nature, pressed upon us by all the ecological revelations and challenges that have arisen since Erikson spoke.

Humans exist only through their mutual relationship with the air they breathe and the food they consume, with the sun that fuels photosynthesis, ocean currents, wind and rain. Mutuality, whether or not we decide to make it our conscious goal, is our essential condition.

Adversaries have the option to build mutuality upon these two principles: first, war in the nuclear age solves nothing and has become obsolete, and second, at every level from the personal to the international, we know now how deeply interdependent and interrelated all humans are with each other and their life-support system.

These two realities have come down upon us a thousand fold since Erikson posited mutuality as an ethical touchstone, renewing and deepening the implications of
the universal Golden Rule. These realities can help guide contemporary diplomats from all nations through the dilemmas that raw military power cannot address.

Threats become less effective than initiating people-to-people exchanges or giving the “enemy” fully-equipped hospitals, gestures of good will that lessen fear and build relationship. Such initiatives are exponentially lower in price than war itself.

As Erikson put it: “Nations today are by definition units of different stages of political, technological and economic transformation . . . insofar as a nation thinks of itself as a collective individual, then, it may well learn to visualize its task as that of maintaining mutuality in international relations. For the only alternative to armed competition seems to be the effort to activate in the historical partner what will strengthen him in his historical development even as it strengthen the actor in his own development, toward a common future identity.”

Finally, Erikson’s “common future identity”, after we understand that we are first of all a single species before we are Persian or Jew, Muslim or Christian, requires the acknowledgement of a further mutuality, the mutuality of earth-human relations.

Our very survival, let alone our flourishing, depends upon cooperation to strengthen the living systems out of which we came, in order to strengthen ourselves. The Golden Rule, priceless beyond gold, calls us to swear on the lives of our grandchildren not only to treat our enemies as we would wish to be treated, but also the earth itself.

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