ON LOVE

If music speaks to the heart, then imagine how much farther and deeper must its reach be when its very theme happens to be love, heart's core passion. The 'Star of the East', as Umm Kulthoum, arguably the Arab World's best-ever singer came to be known, could keep millions of men and women in the grip of her words and sound as people became glued to their radio-sets across the Arab world listening to her latest operatic release. So mesmerized by her that Cairo's streets would come to a standstill on the first Thursday of each month during the season as 'the Lady' was about to perform. While her concert-hall would be packed to the brim with Cairo's elegantly-dressed elites, her live voice and music would beam across Egypt and the rest of the Arab world, and be heard by the rich and poor, in houses and cafes and street-shops, reverberating in the hearts of everyone who

listened. *Sirat al-Hubb* (Love's Tale), is just one of her many songs about love. "*Lo, How beautiful the world is in the eyes of lovers".* "*Ya Salaam ….Ya Salaam*". How is this word, originally meaning peace, and a name of God, translatable in this context? What Magnificence! What Glory! By God Almighty! Behold How Glorious the world becomes seen when viewed with the eyes of love, with the eyes of lovers! One could say the same, *Ya Salaam*, at Um Kulthoum's own magical power, at how she seems to have found the secret of how to open hearts, of how to speak to peoples' deepest personal emotions, to bring alive in them that primal passion, drawing them in as if by a magnet, transforming a multitudinous scatter of human beings into a single symphony, a symphony whose theme is love, a passion experienced or longed for by each, as strongly and as sympathetically as it is felt by each also to be experienced by everyone else.

Odes to love abound wherever human beings have discovered how to express or to respond to the finer and the more beautiful aspects of themselves. I chose to begin with Umm Kulthoum (rather than with, say, *All you need is Love*) only as one example among many of how, even in an Arab milieu drowned by poverty, wars and economic backwardness, at one fell sweep, literally millions would simply swoon at a musical celebration of love, sharing together the same joyous moment, putting behind them for a brief spell all the world's worries. For such is love's insuperable power.

But it is well to keep in mind -and to ponder why- a passion awakened this way cannot be aroused by reason, or by a rational discourse. It was in the midst of a post-nine-eleven atmosphere, and a Huntington-projected future of inevitable cultural collision, that a group of Muslim leaders,

responding to the Regensburg speech of Pope Benedict XVI, in which he seemed to be talking down to Muslims, published in 2007 their Open Letter : *A Common Word Between Us And You*, in the *New York Times*. In that letter –which really was more a kind of declaration- these Muslim leaders appealed to the Christian world to heed the common religious message of love and neighborliness. Only that way -they argued- could world peace (and justice) be achieved. Not long after, a group of Christian leaders published a response, "*Loving God And Neighbor Together: A Christian Response To 'A Common Word Between Us And You'",* in which they underscored the Christian double commandment of loving God and one's neighbor. Soon, Muslim and Christian leaders joined hands, widened their respective circles of support, and embarked on a campaign in their respective communities to propagate this message of love and peace. A whole book,

prefaced (unfortunately) by none other than the six-figure salaried peace envoy Tony Blair, in which scholars and religious leaders highlighted what is common between Christians and Muslims, especially on the theme of love, was published in the United States. But five years on, the prospects of a nuclear war to be unleashed in the Middle East involving a Muslim State, a Jewish State and the United States, seems far more of a reality than an impending assemblage of human hearts. And it is not at all clear that the growing religiosity on all sides is being accompanied by growing toleration by each side of the other.

So one wonders, what happened to love? Put differently, why is the primal passion of love, or for love, not there in the forefront of world human affairs? Is its power not insuperable after all? Has it disappeared from our lives?

I wish here to invoke Ibn Khaldun, that 14th century Arab sociologist, and his concept of compassion, or solidarity. As you may know, Ibn Khaldun proposed solidarity as that quintessential glue that binds human beings together, that gives rise to authority, and explains its rise and fall, and that of the polity more generally. How does he ultimately explain or define it? Significantly, he explains it as being that primal instinct a mother has for its loved one, or that someone has for a blood-relative- that explains that person's readiness to put themselves in harm's way lest that harm reach their beloved. Note that this is not a rational calculation. There is fear, but rather than this being a fear for oneself, it is, primarily, a fear for the other. Rather than fear being a reason for bringing about security through an authority in whom or in which can be vested the right of self-defense, and through whom, therefore, and on the basis of which, a relationship is entered into between oneself and the other -a social

contract, so to speak- it is an instinct that already presupposes a more primal one that binds people together in the first place. This is the instinct of love, or of caring for another. Let me put it another way: in a classical, Hobbesean model, a human association is presupposed by authority, whose function is to provide security. In a Khaldunian model, authority is presupposed by human associations. Here, the authority exercised is motivated by love, or compassion.

I would argue that it is in this primal love for the other (compassion, concern for) that we can find the seed of real peace, and justice. But there is, pitted against this, sometimes in a way that is argued to displace it completely, and sometimes in a way that projects it as the junior partner in the equation, that directionally opposite force or instinct of loving or favoring oneself. That one is prejudiced in favor of oneself is not surprising. But

taken to its extreme, as some political models are wont to do, this instinct of self-favoritism or selfishness is then used as a basic building-block to justify a political system in which peace is viewed defensively, essentially as a security structure. In this perspective, there is a tendency to think that left to our own devices, or viewed at the ground-level, so to speak, we human beings are essentially self-seeking and aggressive, that our primal instinct is our unbridled love for ourselves rather than for others. This being so, and the world being so made up, it becomes necessary to devise a mechanism whereby essentially conflicting selves or wills are made to reach a point of rest, or peace, whether at the level of individuals, or nations, this point simply being the maintenance of order. In this view, we calculatively temper our selfish desires so that we may enjoy those of them we can. But once again, our primary motivation is the satisfaction of our own desires. Note that, in this view, it is our

calculative faculty that is called upon to explain human associations. Umm Kulthoum has no role to play here. Nor is the call to heed the double commandment!

There is also a corollary to this: if asked to explain the love we may feel for our families, or countries, or nations –a love which might make us defend those to the death- someone upholding this view would respond by saying that this love is simply an enlarged projection of self-love. It is not –typically- an example of a love we as human beings have for people or objects we look upon as *others.* Rather, we see these simply as enlarged or projected versions of *ourselves*. In other words, our sense of compassion for those near us, or our caring for them and after them, can be explained precisely in terms of our love for ourselves, zoomed-out, so to speak, so as to cover a larger human landscape. In this way, we manage to explain away our sense of

love for the other as simply being a case of self-love, on a wider scale.

But let us think about whether we are right to do this: is our love for those around us an expanded version of our love for ourselves, or is it different in kind, being truly a love for someone other than ourselves? A Khaldunian would have it that it is different, while a Hobbesean, say, would have it to be the same, or, if not quite the same, to be less dominant than self-love, and in any case to be derived from this. On the first view, love is the essential ingredient of human association; on the second, fear for oneself is.

Returning to the Muslim/Christian initiative of *A Common Word*, its working assumption is that since both religions exhort us to love both God and our neighbors, all that is needed for achieving peace and justice in the world is to make sure that

adherents of these religions heed this call. But how does one make sure that adherents of the two religions come to heed this call? It is hardly likely this can happen through a declaration, let alone through a scholarly discourse. Indeed, the call religious adherents more often heed is that of hate rather than that of love. On the other hand, a cold-blooded survey of the state of the world may encourage us to think that what *peace* there is in the world, is based upon balances of power –that is, on a Hobbesean calculation rather than a religious calling. And *justice*, let it be noted, is often absent in this kind of peace.

That justice is absent, is perhaps more established than why peace exists. Can love possibly help us understand why justice is absent, or why peace truly exists? Let us begin with peace. One could perhaps make out a distinction between positive peace and negative peace. By the former may be

meant that peace whose foundation is our love and care for others –what Ghandi might have had in mind as he referred to the power of the soul; and by the latter may be meant the kind of peace which is engaged in to *stay* any possible deterioration of an existing situation or relationship, and to allow for advantageous benefits that may accrue from such a situation. Negative peace, in the first instance, is there to prevent harm to oneself, often, and without contradiction, at someone else's expense, which is why justice may be absent. Positive peace, in the first instance, is that based on loving others and caring for them, which is why we cannot envision justice being absent from such peace, or why, where it is absent, as when it is so in the same family, it is an anomaly. Negative peace, by definition, flouts a basic Kantian rule for guaranteeing permanence. Positive peace, on the other hand, is fully transparent, embedding no concealed time-bombs. And so, as we seek to make

peace, it is clearly better if we seek that peace which is the natural partner of justice, and therefore better to seek positive rather than negative peace.

Ibn Khaldun, we said, invokes as a primary instinct to which one could reduce societal motion the love we innately carry, paradigmatically, for our children. From that, he moved on to authority , and from authority to kingships and states, at each juncture specifying the characteristics associated with each phase of a society's development, its rise, its apex, and its fall. Classically, love has also been featured as a final cause, explaining individual, but thereby also even planetary motions. In his Princeton, and then London lectures on the subject, Harry Frankfurt outlines the clear borderlines setting apart an instinct such as love, which is volitional, from both rational as well as cognitive faculties. But though volitional, in being instinctive love constrains. One does not choose

whether to love one's children, or with whom to fall in love. One *finds* oneself in love. Frankfurt adds three more 'conceptually necessary' features that define love: it consists in a disinterested concern for the well-being of the person who is loved; its object is a particular, not an exemplar; and it is desired for its own sake, and not as a means. One way or another, love is what makes the world go round –as ends in themselves, the things we love constitute our purposes in life. But, though loved ones or objects constitute purposes in life, they are not for *that* reason loved. Nor, not having –as loved objects- intrinsic values in themselves to make them loved by us, should we assume that pursuing them makes us *better* persons: their pursuit gives *meaning* to our lives, but such meaning is morally neutral.

Love makes the world go round, we understand Frankfurt as saying, but it does not, like Plato

would have it, approximate in its motion to the Good. Another breach he makes is with Kant. Kant expressed concern with ‘the dear self’, or with our never being able to determine whether an act in concordance with duty or the moral imperative was one which was done out of a moral motive -if it wasn’t, in other words, done for some hidden ulterior selfish motive. One could never tell, Kant was supposed to have thought. Frankfurt here questions the meaning of the distinction between self-love and the love of others –whether, in fact, self-love is in any way nefarious. And he argues, bravely, both in favor of viewing self-love as a form of proper love –indeed, as the purest form of love- and in distinguishing it from self-indulgence. Even were one to act morally out of self-love, then, this needn’t mean that one’s act can be, in the Kantian sense, unwholesome. Frankfurt can reach this conclusion –perhaps, he is compelled to reach it- given how he has defined love. But having

reached it, he has to argue his way out of a logical maze. To love oneself, first of all, seems to presuppose two selves, the lover and the loved. And if a conceptually necessary feature of loving the other is selflessness, or having a concern for the other above that for oneself, then wouldn't self-love just be reduced to the unfathomable disconcerned concern? Wouldn't we find ourselves in the horns of a two-wills dilemma? More pointedly, wouldn't such a thesis simply destroy the foundation for distinguishing between positive and negative peace, or pull the rug from under the notion of justice?

Frankfurt manages to lead us out of *his* maze. But he leaves us in a maze of our own. He rearticulates self-love as loving the things one loves. And he unties the inconsistency knot by positing a third *person*, one that sides with either one or the other of two conflicting desires or wills. Well and good,

we might say. But surely, by so conflating such directionally-opposite loves, don't we risk losing its real meaning –what is aroused in us as we listen to Umm Kulthoum? However noble, or pure, our self-love is, surely it is not *that* which Umm Kulthoum arouses, but a love for a specific other, and that specific other is *specifically not* ourselves. We can certainly admit to a certain self-indulgence as we (some of us) listen to her, as we undergo experiencing a mixture of perhaps even conflicting sensations, but this experience simply taps into our reservoir –memory and/or capacity- of love for someone other than ourselves, whose love we place even above the love we have for ourselves.

Why might one raise concern about conflating the love for another with self-love, or about giving self-prejudice or selfishness a more dominant role than compassion or love for the other? The reason, simply, has to do with how then we come to view

the world. If we recognize the first brick in the structure we are about to build as that of love and compassion (rather than self-seeking), we are more likely to iterate this application wherever we come across the possibility of adding another brick, or of setting up a new structure. And if it turns out to be true that it is through such a procedure of building up a positive peace that justice can be assured, simply on account of the fact that it is not order *per se* that would be being sought, but a compassionate peace, then we would also be assured of seeking a permanent peace, and not one that will change as soon as the balance of power changes.

Last week, I was witness to two unsavory manifestations of religion, the Shi'ite celebration of the birth of Ali, which I watched on an Iraqi TV channel, and the Friday sermon from the mosque next-door. In both cases, what I saw was incitement to hate the other, couched and ornamented with

boundless self-adulation. Passion was being aroused, but it was a passion unlike that of Umm Kulthoum's song of love, and it claimed to hail from religious sources but its reach was clearly much farther than that of *A Common Word.* I couldn't help feeling that the crowds filling the mosques weren't by nature different from those listening to Umm Kulthoum, and therefore that – given love's borderless-ness – people must be by nature more inclined to love than to hate. If any conclusion is to be reached from these observations, then, it is that what really keeps the peace in the world is love, just as Ghandi thought, and this, in opposition to those forces that portray the human landscape as a jungle, and who arouse the passions of hate, based upon self-adulation and other-hate.

I began with a love song, but I would like to end with a rational discourse. Here I cite the work of Prince Ghazi bin Mohammad, the man behind the

A Common Word initiative, and who devoted a whole work on the theme of love in the Qur'an. There is God's love for us, which is defined by the kind of people we are; and there is our love of Him, which we are exhorted to do. Concerning the first part, there are seven categories of people singled out for love by God. Of these, one is that of the just. But if the just is singled out for love by God, haven't we also seen that it is only through love –in the form of a positive peace- that justice itself is brought about?

"… should you judge between them, then judge with justice, as God loves those who act justly" (5:42). And, "..should two factions of believers fight amongst themselves, then make peace between them ….and make peace with justice, and act justly/be fair, as God loves those who act justly" (49:9) . And "God does not forbid that you treat as innocent those who have not fought your religion, and those who have not expelled you from your homes, and that you treat them with fairness, as God loves those who act justly. (60:8)