

## **Review of Wole Soyinka's Reith Lectures, 'The Climate of Fear', April/May 2004**

by Francis Clark-Lowes

Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian-born Nobel-prize-winning poet and playwright, argued in his Reith lectures that the primary danger of our time comes from Muslim fundamentalist quasi-states which have created a world-wide climate of fear. Political correctness should not prevent us from recognising this threat to our security and dealing with it decisively.

For those of us who feel that the actions of the only superpower, the United States of America, aided and abetted by its allies, are the real source of today's ills, Soyinka's view is a challenge. Here is a Nigerian presenting, in essence, though with important caveats, the predominant Western narrative. Deal with the fundamentalist Muslim threat first, seems to run the argument, and only then consider what changes might be advisable in Western policies. Those who, like myself, argue that this order needs reversing are regarded by Soyinka as politically correct sentimentalists who fail to recognise evil when it is staring them in the face.

Of course Soyinka does not entirely deny that terrorism perpetrated by Muslim groups may be provoked by Western actions. His discussion of dignity, particularly in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict, gets near to the very root of present world conflict. '... the table fare of the average [Palestinian] is that forced diet of indignity that even children swallow daily, and worse still, watch their parents undergo encounters that denigrate their very humanity.' His apprehension of the Palestinian situation is summed up in one word: humiliation. He condemns the attack on Yasser Arafat's headquarters and comments that since this happened at a time that a UN envoy was with the Palestinian President, it must further have eroded Arab and Muslim confidence 'in an impartial and authoritative intervention from that world organisation.' Soyinka sees that such a situation provides 'willing recruits to the army of terror', and concludes, with reason, that 'the dispersal of the climate of fear rests therefore on a just solution in the Middle East [i.e. Israel-Palestine] – it has been said often enough, it cannot be disputed.'

And yet, having said all this, it seems to me that the burden of Soyinka's lectures does indeed take issue with such a position. Most of what he says would actually argue *for* the Israeli standpoint that the root of the problem is terrorism. It seems therefore no accident that he professes 'enormous respect after several encounters' for Shimon Peres and that he regards as 'legitimate' Peres's anger at Yasser Arafat's 'repudiation of a negotiated agreement with ... [Ehud Barak] in Camp David.' Is this perhaps a case of the victim loving his torturer, at least by proxy? The same Shimon Peres ordered the operation whereby the nuclear whistle-blower, Mordechai Vanunu, was lured from London to Rome and kidnapped from there to Israel. He also approved Vanunu's detention for many years in solitary confinement, a form of torture Wole Soyinka himself suffered for two years in a Nigerian jail. On the question of Barak's so-called 'generous' (but never published) offer, there is

considerable evidence that it amounted to granting the Palestinians control of the floor-space of their prison.

By focussing largely on the threat from a Muslim fundamentalist way of thinking (almost to the exclusion of other fundamentalisms), Soyinka tips the balance in a misleading direction. According to him the violent actions of fundamentalist Muslim groups are irrational. Yet it is not difficult to construct an argument which justifies such terrorism. It would run like this.

The United States élite is engaged in an exercise to achieve full-spectrum dominance in the world. This threatens our Muslim way of life, at best by dilution with values we reject, at worst with extinction. The Soviet Union no longer exists to deter US aggression and protect us. The United Nations has been side-lined and we cannot therefore make our voice heard there. The Western media is largely against us. Conventional military resistance is futile against overwhelmingly superior forces. In these exceptional circumstances, what we need to do is break the popular will which supports current Western policies. In other words we are in a similar position to those who made the decision to drop atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The loss of innocent life can be justified in terms of the greater good that will be achieved. Nearer to home, Madeline Albright also used this argument when justifying the half million children who died under the sanctions regime in Iraq. All in all, our international terrorism, in terms of numbers of victims, is a very much more benign form of warfare than Western imperialism.

Let me hasten to add that I am not endorsing this argument. To do so would render me liable to arrest under the Prevention of Terrorism legislation! But if we look at what Sheikh Ahmad Yassin of Hamas or even Osama bin Ladin actually said/say we find that their way of thinking is not necessarily less rational than that of Western leaders. For example a couple of years before he was killed by the Israeli army Sheikh Yassin stated in an interview: 'All of Palestine is occupied. And there is an entity for the Zionist movement on Palestinian land which embodies apartheid. We want a place that absorbs Palestinian Muslims, Jews and others without differentiation. ... [The] question [of an Islamic state of Palestine] should be left to the democratic process. Let the people select the kind of state they want, in the same way as the United States is a state for all its people and they solve their differences democratically as equals.' You may not agree with this, you may believe that it is disingenuous and deceitful, but it is surely not irrational.

For all their criticism of the present and past US administrations, Soyinka's Reith lectures were, then, a comforting endorsement of key Western beliefs – that we are better than they, that our democracy ensures our superiority, that fear of terrorism is much worse than the fear of having your country bombed to pieces by a superpower. One wonders somewhat cynically whether the BBC sought out Soyinka as a way of restoring its unjustly battered reputation with the British government following the Hutton Report.