



28 January 2005

Doing the Right Thing

Speech by Former President FW de Klerk to the Oxford Union

The question that I would like to deal with tonight is one that confronts us all – countries, governments, universities, individuals. That is how do we know whether we are doing the right thing – and especially, how do we know whether we are doing the right thing in a rapidly changing world?

There is one thing of which we can be certain: it is that our world and our society are changing more rapidly than at any time in human history.

Change is not only more rapid than ever before - it is also more fundamental and more unpredictable. Despite the enormous material and technological progress that we have made we have perhaps never been more uncertain or confused than we are today. This is particularly so with regard to questions of morality and ethics - because of a revolution that has taken place during the past few decades in the value systems with which we grew up. As a result, it is increasingly difficult to know whether we are 'doing the right thing' in any given situation.

Many of the moral and religious values upon which our families and societies were traditionally based are under serious threat - if they have not indeed already been swept aside.

- Throughout much of the Western world, churches are empty and some people say that society has entered the 'post Christian era'.
- In Europe, a large proportion of couples no longer get married. Everywhere the traditional concept of the nuclear family is under threat. We are experiencing a revolution in society's attitudes to sexual morality.
- Children are routinely exposed to a flood of obscenities and blasphemy on TV and in the movies that would have made earlier generations of sailors blush.
- Widespread acceptance of abortion and increasing demands for the legalisation of euthanasia are sweeping aside old attitudes regarding the sanctity of human life.

Many would argue that these developments are healthy – that they serve to eliminate the hypocrisy and inhibitions of former generations; that they have introduced much more open, healthy and human approaches to life.

However, the stark reality is that these new attitudes represent a fundamental challenge to many of our traditional values and beliefs. The reality is that the driving forces in our globalised world are economic, technological, materialistic and rational - and that these forces are often inimical to our search for spiritual meaning and ethical orientation.

The religious impulse of our ancestors often had its root in their awe of the unknown; in the mysteries of the changing seasons and the movements of the sun, moon and stars; and in the eternal riddle of the beginning and end of life. But increasingly, our rapidly expanding pool of scientific knowledge provides compelling and fascinating explanations for many of these ancient mysteries.

Our cultural and religious identity was underpinned by ceremony and taboo. In our age, our sense of the divine has been seriously eroded by our appetite for rational analysis and the familiarity bred by Hollywood epics and the mass commercialisation of religion.

Only a generation or two ago, our moral orientation was fixed by immutable commandments, of black and white notions of right and wrong. But relativistic values and situational morality have swept aside many of these commandments. The general approach today seems to be that we may do whatever we like, provided we do not harm anyone else.

The question that all of us have to deal with is how, under these circumstances, we as individuals, as companies, as organisations, as universities and as governments can know, whether or not, we are doing the right thing? What is right and what is wrong?

There seem to be three broad responses to this question:

- some say that we should be guided by established religious principles;
- others believe that social idealism should show us the way, that we should be guided by the utilitarian principle of the greatest good for the greatest number; and
- still others agree with the economic pragmatism of Adam Smith that we unwittingly best serve the interests of our fellow man by promoting our own interests.

Many people around the world seek to address the moral confusion that confronts them on all sides by returning to fundamental religious principles. They claim that the rules by which we ought to live are ordained by God and revealed in scripture. They are not prepared to compromise on scriptural commandments regarding sexual morality or the right to life.

Others believe, on the contrary, that we should be guided by rationally based principles of social justice and equity: that all individuals are free and equal and have a right to lead their lives as they see fit, provided that they do not harm others in the process. These people are also strongly committed to protecting the environment; they believe that big business and the profit motive are the roots of all evil; they distrust the globalised economy and advocate state intervention to achieve their objectives.

Finally, there are the economic pragmatists, who take their lead from the natural imperatives of survival, self-interest and evolution.

Economic pragmatists are generally sceptical of the efforts of the social idealists. They point to the manifest failure of five decades of foreign aid to assist the ordinary people of Africa. They ask how many jobs the churches and social idealists have created and how they intend to produce the wealth that they are so eager to redistribute.

The global ethical debate throughout the world is dominated by these three approaches: by religious fundamentalism; by social idealism and by economic pragmatism.

We see them manifested in President Bush's policy on stem-cell research; we see them in the on-going protests against globalisation in Seattle, Prague and Genoa; we see them in the debate on whether the United States should or should not adhere to the international convention on global warming. We see them in the policy of the Catholic Church on contraception and in the right-to-life debate. We see them in the fervent conflicts between fundamentalists of different religions in the Middle East and elsewhere. We see them in the Third World's demands for global justice. Most tragically, we saw them in the appalling terrorist attack on the United States on 9/11. The Al Qaida terrorists believed fervently that their action was right and sanctioned by God – just as the Neo Conservatives in the United States are convinced that the US invasion of Iraq was the 'right thing to do'.

Who is right and who is wrong - and how should individuals, companies, organisation and governments behave in the light of this debate? How can we know whether we are doing the right thing?

The fact is that each of these traditions has contributed greatly to the development and well-being – and to the suffering - of mankind:

Religion is the final source of purpose and meaning for billions of people throughout the world. Also for me. Time-tested religious norms and values provide us with sure direction in a shifting and uncertain world. Yet in its most extreme form, religious fundamentalism was used to justify the destruction of ancient Buddhist statues and the pitiful subjugation of women in Afghanistan. It was used to justify apartheid. It is used to inspire children to become suicide bombers or to justify the vilification of homosexuals. Throughout the ages the most unspeakable atrocities have been committed in the name of religious principle.

We should also not discount the enormous gains that mankind has made because of the reforms that have been initiated by social and political idealists. The world in which we live today is a far better, kinder and more just place because of them. Yet, when social idealism is not curbed by religious principle and pragmatism it can mutate into the most dreadful ideologies. Lenin, Stalin, Hitler and Pol Pot all started off with their own perverted visions of a better world - for which, if necessary, they were quite prepared to sacrifice millions of lives.

There is also no doubt that economic pragmatists have been primarily responsible for generating the wealth and technology that has fundamentally transformed the lives of hundreds of millions of people for the better. Ironically, it is they - much more than the idealists - who have satisfied mankind's ancient longing for material well-being, health, information and entertainment.

Yet, in its extreme form, economic pragmatism can be used to justify a callous disregard for justice and for the needs of those who are least able to compete in the economic process. It can lead to the exploitation of the weak and the devastation of our fragile environment.

Where does all of this leave us? I believe it takes us back to the heart of the human condition, and that is, trying to make the best choices in a complex and changing world. There is no absolute truth. We need to combine the adherence to basic values and striving for a better world with the practical question of what is possible and what not, what is affordable and what not. We need balance.

Often, the best choice is the one that is the least bad: it is the decision to retrench thousands of loyal workers so that the company can survive; it is the decision to kill an intruder to defend the lives of one's family; it is the decision to report a friend who has committed a crime. Perhaps, most dreadfully, it was President Truman's decision to drop 'A' bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to save the millions of Japanese and allied lives that would inevitably have been lost in a conventional invasion of Japan.

Trying to do the 'right thing' in our personal daily lives; in our business dealings and in the intercourse of nations, lies at the very heart of the human condition - and there are no easy answers.

We need religious principles – or if you prefer to call it a basic value system - to provide us with our fundamental view of what is right and what is wrong. We need ideals to direct us toward a better and a more just world.

But we also need to make our choices within the framework of a pragmatic understanding of human nature and economic realities.

The history of my country, South Africa, over the past 50 years provides a good case study in this regard. The architects of institutionalised apartheid forty years ago, were idealists. They were devout Christians just like many Americans who rationalised discrimination on the basis of race and ethnicity.

In our case the National Party of the fifties and sixties wanted to unscramble the South African omelette and to bring justice to all by creating independent states for all of our constituent peoples. They foresaw a time when there would be a commonwealth of states in southern Africa that would work together in peace and harmony. The theory was that, when we reached that stage, the need for racial discrimination would fall away - just as communists believed that the need for the dictatorship of the proletariat would fall away when they had achieved their Utopia.

The trouble is that the idealism of the political leadership of that time was not sufficiently informed by pragmatism, by an understanding of human nature and economic realities. Neither, in retrospect, do I believe that those policies were guided by a true understanding of basic religious principles. To achieve separate development millions of South Africans were moved against their will from areas that they had occupied for generations. Millions more were subjected to the daily humiliation of racial segregation and exclusion.

By the end of the 1970's it became evident to most of us in the ruling National Party that the vision of bringing justice through partition had failed. Instead of leading to a just solution, it had resulted in manifest injustice. We had to acknowledge that what we had done was morally unjustifiable and irreconcilable not only with our religious principles but also with the pragmatic economic and demographic realities of our country.

We had to face the reality that what we were doing was not only wrong - but was also doomed to failure. We had to develop a new vision, a vision of a united South Africa that would conform not only to moral principles, but also to the economic and human realities of our country. On this basis we developed a vision of a New South Africa that would be shared by all its people and in which all of its citizens would enjoy equal constitutional rights – a New South Africa in which there would be no discrimination. We then had to take very difficult decisions and adopt pragmatic policies and strategies to bring our new ideal into fruition.

We succeeded to negotiate an historical pact between all those who had been in conflict for so long. The result was a new Constitution in which is enshrined a basic fair and just value system. We agreed on the ideals and values that would provide the foundation of our new society and we committed our country to realistic and pragmatic economic policies. Our historic agreement I believe struck a balance between the need for guiding principles and values, idealism and pragmatism. Now we are confronted with the enormous task of ensuring that the new South Africa remains a success and that the constitutional rights and guarantees that we negotiated will continue to be enjoyed by all our people.

This I firmly believe is what all of us should strive for in our quest for peace and development throughout the world.

- We need to adhere to principles and values to provide our lives with meaning and direction - and to serve as our ultimate ethical lodestar.
- We need ideals to lead us to a better and a more just world. We must address the needs of the hundreds of millions of people who have not yet begun to share in the benefits of the global economy. We must cherish and nurture our environment.
- But all of this must be done within the pragmatic framework of what is possible - and with a clear understanding of economic realities and human nature.

I believe that if we take all these factors into consideration, we will have a good chance of doing the ‘right thing’ in our complex world. Our decisions then will be informed –

- not by unthinking religious fanaticism;
- not by unrealistic idealism; and
- not by compassionless pragmatism –

but rather by that illusive distillation of principle, idealism and experience that we call conscience.

**Issued by the FW de Klerk Foundation.
Cape Town, 28 January 2005.**