Metaphorical bridge-building for promoting understanding and peaceful coexistence

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ABSTRACT

After briefly sketching the tumultuous nature of life in modern societies, the author calls on the reader to imagine for him- or herself the construction of a metaphorical traffic intersection that would enable those who make use of it to 'fly over' all the mayhem and disturbances. The proposed 'flyover' consists of three sub-structures or 'bridges', namely social capital, spirituality and education. A discussion of each of these sub-structures is followed by a discussion of the combination of all three in a virtual flyover that could contribute to a world characterised by greater understanding, respect, tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, human existence is marked by controversy, fragmentation, strife, disagreement, deterioration of the social fabric and a lack or loss of security and dignity. In the recent past the problem has been exacerbated by globalisation, porous/permeable national borders and improved communications and transport, resulting in worldwide migrations and displacements of people who seek to improve their lives elsewhere. Worldwide, human existence is characterised by issues of democracy and governance, individual and group attitudes (with respect to ethnicity, race and race relations [racism, inequality, discrimination, stereotyping, xenophobia], gender, the direction in which a country is going, the politics, social justice, whether elections will be peaceful and uncontroversial, the matter of national pride, issues of culture [multiculturalism] and religion [multi-religion and multi-faith]), problems pertaining to the question of national unity versus individual as well as group identity, issues of coexistence, crime and conflict, issues of income and poverty, standard of living, unemployment and taxes.

The situation is further aggravated by issues of economy and the movement of international funds, the national budgets (deficits), economic growth, the struggle between rich and poor, inflation, stagflation, money laundering, human trafficking and sexual exploitation, sex tourism, the availability and cost of communication, the provision of services (electricity, water, roads, medical), and issues with respect to the transformation and improvement of education, including affordability and access. The list of issues can be extended by adding problems such as social status, partner violence, family breakdown, the value system to be maintained, problems surrounding age distribution (an ageing population or a very young population due to untimely deaths because of HIV/AIDS, TB and other diseases), issues of health and disease. (See Chen, Fukuda-Parr & Seidenstricker [2003] for a series of detailed discussions on the theme 'human insecurity in a global world', and Martin [2007:30–32] for a list of mega-problems that humankind has to deal with, some of which could even mean the end of *Homo sapiens*).

There is a vast array of issues about which the citizens of a country can quarrel, even to the extent of engaging in physical conflict. All the countries on earth are microcosms of the turmoil described above (see Pillay, Roberts & Rule [2006] for discussions about changing times and attitudes in South Africa). There is just nowhere to shelter from all the afflictions. The options are simple: either do the best under the circumstances by going with the flow of argument, agreement, dissent, dissatisfaction and argument and even strife, as the case may be, or keep to yourself, hide behind high walls and security gates, and engage in the mayhem outside only on your own terms, if and when possible.

This paper will argue for a third possibility, namely the construction of a metaphorical flyover (an intersection of two or more roads at which one or more is carried over the others by means of bridges; 'overpass' in America and Australia), that would help individuals and groups not only acquire a bird's-eye view of all the turmoil and activity going on, but also help them to metaphorically 'fly over' all the mayhem, and in doing so, to help them bridge the gap with different others in the broader context.

The metaphorical flyover consists of three intersecting bridging structures: social capital, spirituality and education. The purpose of the 'flyover' is not to render all people the same, nor make them think the same about life, its mysteries and afflictions; its purpose is rather to promote mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence. As will be argued, the 'flyover' facilitates a smoother interchange of ideas and thoughts about all the aspects of human life on this planet, and in doing so will promote understanding of others. A greater understanding of differences, and what gives rise to them, will hopefully lead to a decrease in the less pleasant aspects of modern life, such as strife, conflict and misunderstandings. In the process, a 'meta-value' framework might emerge, one in terms of which all people on earth will have a greater understanding of one another and their differences, and have respect for others, their rights and freedoms as human beings. Key to this process is a trade-in of cynicism about others and their motives for understanding, respect and tolerance.

This proposal has similar aims to those of Martin, who says that we have to extricate ourselves from what he terms 'the canyon years' (the crisis period) in which people on the earth find themselves:

> *The traumas of the canyon years will make it clear that our world has to be made less fragile. As humanity emerges from this period, it will have different rules of behaviour and very different technology.*
> (Martin 2007:375)

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The 'flyover' and 'bridging' strategy proposed in this paper differs from Martin's, however, in that whereas he says that we have to employ

> *a large and diverse set of actions to stop the harm being done and put humankind on a different course… (such as) rules, protocols, methodologies, codes of behaviour, cultural facilities, means of governance, treaties and institutions of many types that will enable us to cooperate and thrive on Planet Earth.*
>
> (Martin 2007:375–376)

the 'flyover/bridging' strategy proposed here is premised by a change of attitude: only greater understanding, love, respect for and tolerance of others and their peculiarities can lead to a more prosperous and peaceful coexistence. Instead of engineering all types of safeguards as Martin proposes, we should rather concentrate on bringing about a worldwide change of heart. That is where the three bridges (social capital, spirituality and education) can play their respective and complementary intersecting roles.

The further discussion is structured as follows. Each of the sub-structures of the 'flyover' is conceptually and theoretically examined, with particular reference to their inherent bridging potential. This is followed by a discussion of how they could augment each other and be used as sub-structures in the proposed metaphorical flyover towards facilitating improved understanding among individuals and groups.

THE THREE DIFFERENCE-SPANNING BRIDGES THAT COMPRISE THE 'FLYOVER'

Social capital

The term 'social capital' has, since its first use by Lyda J. Hanifan in 1916, developed into a catch-all phrase with a wide variety of meanings, ranging from economic productivity to social benefit. Many of the definitions refer to manifestations of social capital rather than to social capital itself. In this paper its meaning is restricted to accumulated social wealth. Fukuyama's (1999a:2) definition is in line with this when he claims that 'social capital is an instantiated informal norm that promotes cooperation between two or more individuals'. John Field's central thesis (referred to by Smith 2007:2), namely that 'relationships matter,' is also in line with this view. The central idea, according to Field, is that 'social networks are a valuable asset'. Interaction enables people to build communities, to commit themselves to each other, and to knit the social fabric. A sense of belonging and the concrete experience of social networks (including the relationships of trust and tolerance that can be involved) can, he argues, benefit people greatly. This is also the gist of Stone's (2001) contention: social capital is a multidimensional concept comprising networks of social relations characterised by norms of trust and reciprocity.

Bourdieu's (1983:249) definition is similar: Social capital may be understood as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources that are linked to the existence of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition. In his view, social capital is almost entirely benevolent since it provides a set of norms for cooperation among individuals for their mutual benefit.

Putnam (2000:19) views social capital in the same light as physical and human capital. Physical capital refers to physical objects, whereas human capital refers to the properties of individuals. Just as a screwdriver (physical capital) or a college education (human capital) can increase productivity (both individually and collectively), so do social contacts affect the productivity of individuals and groups (Wikipedia 2008). Social capital refers to connections among individuals, the social networks they create, and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that flow from these networks. The acquisition of social capital is based on trust, reciprocity, networking and collective action, and takes time to develop (Flora 1997). Social capital describes the pattern and intensity of networks among people and the shared values that arise from such networks. The main aspects of social capital are citizenship, neighbourliness, trust, shared values, community involvement, volunteering, social networks and civic participation (UK Snapshot: Social Capital 2008). Social capital is frequently a by-product of religion, tradition, shared historical experience, and other factors that lie outside the control of any government (Fukuyama 1999a).

According to Fukuyama (1996; 1999b), the relationship between social capital, community building and trust is largely dependent on the presence of sharing and cooperation. Social capital is the existence of a specific set of informal values or norms shared amongst members of a group that permits cooperation amongst them.

The construct 'social capital' is built around the core notion of connectedness between individuals, among groups, and between individuals and groups. It possesses both an individual (personal) and a social or societal side (the latter in the form of, for instance, civic duties, social networks, accountability and the body politic). In economic terms, all the definitions of social capital tend to share the central idea that social networks have economic value in the form of productivity (Wikipedia 2008). In a social context, the notion of productivity must be replaced by connectedness, reciprocity and cooperation for the benefit of all concerned. Smith (2007) correctly warns against the pitfalls of economic 'capitalisation', i.e. the tendency to reduce everything to the economic.

Woolcock (as quoted in Smith 2007:6) distinguishes between 'bonding' social capital, which refers to ties within a close-knit group such as immediate family; 'bridging' social capital, which refers to more distant ties such as between friends; and 'linking' social capital, which refers to reaching out to people in quite dissimilar situations, such as the destitute. The former may be more inward looking and exclusive, whereas the latter may encompass individuals and groups across divides.

The creation of social capital (social cohesion) is all about social bridge-building. Although there is a difference of opinion about whether the creation of social capital, in the form of establishing social networks and civic ties, cuts across different ethnic and religious communities and groups (Coletta 2003) or whether it is usually created through cultural mechanisms like religion, tradition, or historical habit (Fukuyama 1996), the fact remains that social capital (building) is a difference-spanning bridge. It is associational in that it spans chasms within and among groups, and also individual differences in terms of gender, age, social class, religion and ethnicity. The creation of social capital is therefore a critical instrument for building democratic institutions and sustainable peace (Coletta 2003). Although particular groups (such as religious or cultural groups) may create bonding and bridging social capital (cohesion) for themselves and for their members, this should not be at the expense of outsiders. The creation of positive social capital requires withstanding the natural proclivity of dividing people into insiders and outsiders – which is the basis of all politics (Fukuyama 1999a).

It is necessary to note that, as also indicated by Smith (2007), social capital, in the sense of close social cohesion, can have a downside. Groups and organisations with high social capital have the means (and sometimes the inclination) to exclude and subordinate others. The experience of living in close-knit communities can also be stultifying to those who feel they are 'different' in some way.

Fukuyama (1999a) correctly indicates that it is difficult to measure a nation's stock of social capital (also see Stone 2001). Despite this, the extent to which social capital has been created in a particular community (including a nation) can be broadly gauged by applying norms such as:

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- To what extent are the members of the community spanning the differences between themselves and others? To what extent is attention given to the process of thrashing out differences of opinion, for instance about the future? To what extent are people allowed to enforce their opinions at the expense of others?
- To what extent do people withstand the natural human inclination to divide people into insiders and outsiders; in other words, how inclusive are groups and networks? To what extent can in-group solidarity be overcome for purposes of cooperating with outsiders (Fukuyama 1999a)? To what extent are heterodox individuals that drift among groups able to integrate with a particular group and fertilise it with new ideas and information before moving on? How much goodwill does there exist among individuals and groups? Do individuals and groups not take advantage of others in unforeseen circumstances? To what extent has excessive individualism been overcome and is there a propensity towards voluntary association? To what extent do people feel safe enough to associate, volunteer, vote, or take care of one another? How flexible are the groups; do they allow for the participation of individuals only for the period of time that they can make a substantial contribution? Are the boundaries of groups permeable, in the sense that new partnerships and collaborations can be formed?
- How cohesive is the group and how does it relate to others?
- What is the radius of trust among all the individuals and the sub-groups that constitute the community (Fukuyama 1999a)? To what extent do the different radii of trust in the community overlap? How stable and safe is the environment; is it conducive to public interaction, property rights, and to trust arising spontaneously (Fukuyama 1999a)?
- To what extent are norms shared and applied for the purpose of promoting cooperation?
- To what extent have the informal norms of individuals and groups been shaped by shared religious and historical experience? To what extent is lateral learning from experience possible?
- To what extent are goals shared and different points of view in the community accepted and valued by others, and how is progress towards shared goals measured? To what extent do individuals and groups learn from their failures in attempting to reach their goals (instead of apportioning blame)? To what extent is controversy tolerated? (When everything appears smooth and there is consensus about everything, when no discussion occurs and no new issues are brought forward, it is a sign that visions of the future are not being shared, and alternative ways of getting there not being developed. In this situation, conflict often lies just beneath the surface.)
- To what extent are individuals and groups vertically connected with regional, state and national resources? Can resources be mobilised and made accessible to all (Flora 1997)?

Flora (1997) is correct in saying that the creation of social capital takes conscientious effort. Each individual citizen must be included, not just to meet their needs, but also for what they can offer the community. Every person has not only a living, but also a life, she says. People make a living by what they get; they make a life by what they give. Social capital (creation) is indeed a bridging structure and merits a place in the overall composition of the proposed 'flyover'.

Spirituality

Spirituality, a phenomenon that is notoriously difficult to define (De Muynck 2008; *cf.* Waaijman 2000), forms the second bridge in the metaphorical flyover.

The discussion of social capital has already brought religion to the surface. As indicated, there is a difference of opinion as to whether social capital spans the differences between religious groups or whether it is actually created as a by-product within and through religious groups (Fukuyama 1999a). Recently developed insights into the phenomenon of spirituality can help to solve this conundrum.

There seems to be two kinds of spirituality, namely that which, according to Abdool, Potgieter, Van der Walt and Wolhuter (2007), forms the core or epicentre of mainstream religion (in other words, a form of spirituality within mainstream religion), and a form of spirituality which, according to its adherents, transcends traditional religion, faith and religious institutions like churches, mosques, temples and shrines. This is a so-called 'new' or 'secular' form of religiosity that has grown in recent decades (Fukuyama 1999a) and that is not connected to traditional mainstream religion, but is characterised by some or other form of supra-confessional, supra-dogmatic and supra-institutional/-denominational affiliation (Engebretson 2003; Ferguson & Wright 1988; Tacey 2004; Vermeer & Van der Ven 2004). According to its adherents, reversion to the 'old' spirituality associated with mainstream religion no longer satisfies the needs of modern day (especially young) people. Globalisation, multi-culturalism, multi-religionism and the post-modern spirit render adherence to 'old' forms of religion and their concomitant spirituality obsolete. Under these conditions, orthopraxis seems to have become more important than orthodoxy (to quote Van Niekerk 2005:26, slightly out of context).

Irrespective of type, spirituality remains the way in which a transcendent and ultimate reality impacts on people so that they become willing servants of that ultimate reality. Spirituality can evoke a wide spectrum of aspects concerning the lives of human beings, but it remains in essence a form of passion, of being driven (motivated), of the experience of having been laid claim to (Hardjono & Klamer 2005). Spirituality is the manner in which one, by orientating oneself to a particular source or sources, relates beliefs/convictions and experiences of inspiration and/or transcendence, more or less methodically, to the actual practice of life (De Muynck 2008b). De Muynck's definition produces four conceptual frameworks. Firstly, it points to a transcendental source that is seen to be inspirational, and with which one can have a relationship. Secondly, the inspiration is aimed at effecting or achieving something. Thirdly, inspiration evokes a search for meaning. Lastly, inspiration has significance for everyday life and practice (De Muynck 2008a).

Roothaan (2007) distinguishes two other sides to spirituality: it is both a form of experience and a way of doing. According to Roothaan, spirituality tells us something about how a person conducts him- or herself in life, but it also refers to his/her attitude through which s/he shows how s/he is being moved by that which is regarded as the greatest mover (inspiration). In essence, spirituality refers to life-attitude, the stance or *habitus* of the individual that maintains the balance between spiritual experience and action.

All individuals and groups tend to ask questions such as the following, which emanate from the deep spiritual level of humanness: Who am I; and how do I relate to the divine, to evil and unhappiness or loss, guilt and shame? Irrespective of whether associated with mainstream religion, faith and religious institutions, or whether supra-confessional and -denominational, spirituality symbolises a human being's quest for depth and values, and describes how a person or people relate their beliefs and actions towards what they regard as the divine and/or otherness with their own being and core values. In a sense, the spiritual dimension represents the mystical face of religion, the fountainhead of divinity, and the source and essence of the soul (Abdool *et al.* 2007).

The bridging function of spirituality is premised by two claims. The first is that all people, every individual, irrespective of religious affiliation (including agnostics and atheists),

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experience some or other source of inspiration. All people are somehow motivated and driven by a source of inspiration, by something that they 'believe' in or 'have faith' in. The source of inspiration may vary from the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible or in other holy books to material things like money or possessions. The second claim is that the fact that people might be variously inspired by sources quite different from a particular individual's own should be respected and tolerated. When respect and tolerance is shown, spirituality can become a source of shared values (which in itself is a form of social capital). Viewed in this light, spirituality is a community-building bridge that transcends sectarianism, which is a source of intolerance, violence and hate.

Education

Education is yet another nebulous term (Winkler 2006). The meaning of education referred to here is broader than the more customary construal of its meaning as teaching–learning, instruction (Dutch: *onderwijs* or *onderricht*) and/or the acquisition of knowledge and skills. The broader meaning is related to the etymologies of the terms 'to educate' and 'pedagogy': respectively from Latin *educatio*, derived from *e-* (out) and *ducere* (lead) – to lead out, and Greek *ped-* (boy, child) and *agoo* (to lead) – to lead or guide a child. The education in question here is the equipping (unfolding of potential) of the educand (the person being educated) as a total human being (Verbrugge 2007) for the purpose of helping him or her to the independent acquittal of the duties of his or her vocation in adult life (Van Rensburg, Landman & Bodenstein 1988; see also Van der Molen 1979). It is nothing less than the total upbringing of a (less mature) person. Its meaning is similar to that which was encapsulated in the classical notion of *paideia* (Winkler 2006); it is also more akin to the German *Erziehung* (drawing-out) and *Bildung* (forming) than to *Unterricht* (instruction, teaching). Education in this broader sense obviously also entails a learning process (Hermanns 2007).

To educate, in this encompassing sense, is a process for which the educator has to deliberately assume responsibility. The educator is responsible for decisions taken on behalf of and in the interest of the educand. He or she should be able to provide reasons for how the educand is being educated. To educate is to do the right thing by the educand as a developing, learning and free human being. The decisions of a responsible educator all flow from genuine love and concern for the educand (Van Crombrugge 2006; Verbrugge 2007). Accountability also compels the educator to reflect about the pedagogical appropriateness of each intervention and to make careful choices about the educand's future and how its demands could be met. All decisions have to be in the best interest of the educand, and should be in accordance with the development level, the learning processes and the freedom of the educand.

Looked at from the outside, education seems to take the form of a series of interactions between at least two people whereby one (the educand) is being influenced and guided by the other (the educator). It also seems to take the form of a circular process, a constant play of action and reaction. In this process the educator can be seen as only one of many actors, one who, as such, has only relatively restricted influence. The educator's duty is to help the educand attain the development level necessary for taking responsible and virtuous decisions. The rest is up to the educand. The educator can only help the educand become a virtuous person by, among others, assisting with his/her spiritual development (Verbrugge 2007).

The development of the educand is affected by many influences from the surroundings, by a wide array of factors and actors (Van Crombrugge 2006), not least of which is the stock of social capital of which the educator and others in the environment are the embodiments and the purveyors. Education is also reciprocal: The educand influences the actions of the educator, and how the educand experiences the pedagogical contact is co-determined by the meanings assigned by the educand to such pedagogical experiences (Van Crombrugge 2006).

As an insider, the educator constantly asks him- or herself what s/he is doing and how s/he can account for decisions taken about the educand and his or her future. Questions are also asked about the responses of the educand: How is the educand responding to pedagogical interventions, are these interventions pedagogically justifiable, and is the educand being guided in the desired direction (Van Crombrugge 2006)? Both educator and educand are faced by the fact that they are not alone in this venture; they are not the sole compilers of the pedagogical agenda. They occasionally find themselves in situations not of their own making or choice, and things sometimes develop in unexpected ways. All such conditions can influence the unfolding of the educand (Imelman 1982).

DISCUSSION

The creation and stockpiling of social capital, as well as respect and tolerance of spirituality and spiritual difference, are two of the bridges that span the wide variety of religious, social and other divides prevalent in modern societies. The introduction of education as the third sub-structure of this construction is necessitated by the need to guide, help, equip and enable those who are not yet able to avail themselves of the advantages of the first two 'bridges', either because they are too young or still ignorant about what life requires of them. Only truly educated people, in other words, people equipped with appropriate insight into how all these sub-structures/bridges work and can serve humankind, will be able to make optimal use of those structures. Fukuyama (1996) underscores this point by saying that the acquisition of social capital requires habituation to the moral norms of a community, and in its context, the acquisition of virtues like loyalty, honesty and dependability. He makes the important point that social capital cannot be acquired simply by individuals acting on their own. The accrual of social capital is not only based on the prevalence of social rather than individual virtues. It also depends on the extent to which the 'older', more experienced and better-equipped generation is able to guide, lead and equip the upcoming generation with an appreciation of the principles, norms and values of sociability in that particular context. In doing so, they do not only transmit human capital, they also pass on social capital in the form of the social rules and norms applicable in that community (Fukuyama 1999a).

Education does not only facilitate the bridging of differences by helping people understand, and urging them to use, other bridging structures: it is itself a bridging structure. It helps the educand to advance from a state of ignorance and incapability to a state of being more enlightened and better equipped for discharging his or her duties as a grown-up, as a member of a particular society or body politic. Education in the broader sense bridges gaps between educator (as the more mature guide) and the educand (as the immature follower). It also spans the gap between the educand and the wider community in that the educator, as embodiment of the particular community's social capital and spirituality, can help, guide, lead, equip, enable and 'discipline' the educand to become a mature and accountable member of the community.

CONCLUSION

The metaphorical or 'virtual' flyover that is required in modern fragmented communities comprises at least three sub-structures: (the stock of, the creation of) social capital; efforts at getting into spiritual touch with others despite religious (and other) differences that might prevail; and education as the process through which the next generation is aided, guided and equipped to avail themselves of the advantages of all the bridging structures. (The three bridging structures discussed in this paper are of course not the only ones, but they are arguably the three most important.) Social capital, spirituality

and education can be seen as three bridges enabling people to rise above the mayhem going on around them and to gain deeper perspective of and insight into events, conditions, and the lives of others. They also enable people to cross chasms between themselves and others. They help people to rise above their own differences and motivate them to cooperate in the best interests of all.

The three bridges in the 'flyover' furthermore facilitate a more immediate understanding of others and their peculiarities. It is, for instance, not necessary, at a first encounter with another and his or her religion, to directly understand all the finer details and intricacies of the other person's religion (confessional aspects, rituals, customs, faith, beliefs, institutions). It is here that the three bridges will serve a helpful purpose. Having been adequately educated, one should better understand that the other's beliefs and actions are motivated by deeper sources of meaning (their spirituality) and by the stock of social capital amassed in his or her particular (religious) community. Such understanding breeds respect and tolerance, in this case for religious differences.

Better insight into others and their peculiarities (differences) can also contribute to the educator's own, personal stock of social capital and a revival of his or her spiritual life. A replenished stock of social capital and a deeper sense of spiritual bonding will enable him or her to guide, assist and equip the educand even better, for assuming his or her rightful place in today's complex society and life.

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