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ALLIANCE OF CIVILISATIONS AND SOLIDARITY BETWEEN
CIVILISATIONS; A LOST OCCASION FOR EUROPE

Alliance of Civilisations and Solidarity between Civilisations, a lost occasion for Europe.

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1. The Report of the High Level Contact Group.

On November 12th 2006, Turkey and Spain presented the Report of the High Level Group (HLG) established in the United Nations to develop the concept and programme for an Alliance of Civilisations they had promoted. In this section we will concentrate on the contents of the Report¹, and will provide a critical assessment...

The Report starts with an encouraging premise:

The Alliance seeks to address widening rifts between societies by reaffirming a paradigm of mutual respect among peoples of different cultural and religious traditions and by helping to mobilize concerted action toward this end. This effort reflects the will of the vast majority of peoples to reject extremism in any society and support respect for religious and cultural diversity.

The Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UD) 1948 are indicated in the Report as being the guiding documents of the HLG.

The integrity of these rights rests on their universal and unconditional nature. These rights should therefore be considered inviolable and all states, international organizations, non-state actors, and individuals, under all circumstances, must abide by them.

This is an important statement. A few lines after this it goes on:

There is no hierarchy among cultures, as each has contributed to the evolution of humanity. The history of civilizations is in fact a history of mutual borrowing and constant cross fertilisation.

This is another important statement.

The point to be made is that such a short-cut affirmation about the hierarchy of cultures leaves too many empty spaces.

Indeed, what happens when a State, an international organisation, a non-governmental organisation or even individuals carry out a death penalty or support certain types of mortal torture such as the stoning of Muslim women for adultery? By calling into cause the non-hierarchy of cultures, then whoever carries out these practises would find a justification, a loop-hole.

It would be better to delimit this statement and say that, in line of principal there is no hierarchy of cultures, although values that they may hold do not always respect fundamental rights, consequently there is a need order them. So, a true Alliance of Civilisations can and should require a re-ordering of values by means of appropriate training and formation actions, legal paths and their application within certain States, and therefore civilisation and cultures as a whole.

A clear example comes precisely from one of the two sponsors of the Alliance of Civilisations, Turkey. In respecting the adhesion criteria to the EU, Turkey abolished the death penalty. This fact goes beyond simply respecting a law or a requirement and assumes cultural importance, precisely because it leads to greater respect for an individual's life.

By trying to distance itself from cultural relativism the Report risks transforming what it has just stated as being, 'universal', 'unconditional' and 'inviolable', into incomplete, relative and vulnerable, i.e., exactly the opposite of the intentions.

However there is a more important problem, the source of the human rights. To state their universal nature and make the Muslim world accept them fully, the UN Charter and the UD are not enough. Indeed, a little further in the same Report it goes on to read:

Western powers maintain overwhelming political, economic, and military power in the world, including disproportionate influence in multilateral political and economic bodies.

If this is how things are (we do not want here look at the merits of this problem), can we expect that the Muslim world accepts the UD if this is presented as the product of an organisation, the UN, that is piloted by 'Western powers'? The answer is obvious. We should also note that only Turkey of all the Muslim countries has signed the UD.

Definitely it is the Report itself with its own definitions that adds new obstacles, along with existing ones, to acceptance of the UD by the Muslim world. Firstly, by stating the non-hierarchy of cultures in a way that can only produce confusion, and then implying that international organisation (obviously including the UN) are instruments of 'Western powers', meaning the US and Europe. In this way the HLG has mined the very basis of the Alliance of Civilisations.

The fact is that the Muslim world must convince itself of the universality of human rights, but it would be an error to think that this can happen by simply adopting juridically binding declarations.

Islamic culture has channels that could never put aside the transcendental. This means that a direct correspondence must be found between human rights as indicted in the UD and Islamic doctrine. This fact is perfectly possible but requires a degree of reflexion. According to the Report:

"In some cases, self-proclaimed religious figures have capitalized on a popular desire for religious guidance to advocate narrow, distorted interpretations of Islamic teachings. Such figures misportray certain practices, such as honour killings, corporal punishment, and oppression of women as religious

requirements. These practices are not only in contravention of internationally-agreed human rights standards, but, in the eyes of respected Muslim scholars, have no religious foundation. Such scholars have demonstrated that a sound reading of Islamic scriptures and history would lead to the eradication and not the perpetuation of these practices”.

The parallel between Islamic doctrine and UD therefore exists; it needs only be made universally accepted by the Muslim world. This however is not a simple task. An example of this difficulty was the protests that shook Pakistan in November 2006 after the passing in Parliament of the “Woman’s Protection Bill”, that transferred adultery from religious justice to penal law thus eliminating the need for a woman of four witnesses in cases of rape. According to the more radical Islamic parties this was against the Koran, while according to others, who certainly would come under the definition used in the Report of ‘qualified Muslim specialists’, it was perfectly compatible with Islamic principles. Indeed, it was exactly on the basis of this compatibility that the law was approved even if this opinion was not shared by all parties in Islamabad. This is an example of a case where the link between Koran and law was fundamental for the application of human rights (as they come directly from the Creator), a fact that otherwise would not have been possible.

However, both in Pakistan and other Muslim countries a long and difficult path still needs to be taken. In Islamic countries, with the sole exception of Turkey, no big decision in the political, economic, social or cultural field can be taken without taking religion into account.

How can the Alliance of Civilisations help this path? One possible and indeed very fruitful line of actions is unfortunately not contemplated in the Report. This is inter-religious dialogue. This is an area where an alliance could easily be reached, an alliance between the three great monotheist religions. For Christianity, we need only remember a recent statement by Benedict XVI for whom the dignity of man and fundamental rights, “are values beyond any State jurisdiction. These fundamental rights are not created by legislators but are written in the very nature of man and therefore derive finally from the Creator.” It would be far easier for the Muslim world to accept respect for the dignity of man and fundamental human rights from the Creator rather than the UD. By excluding the transcendental nature of dialogue with Islam, the Alliance risks stalling right from the start.

Before continuing with an analysis of the Report, we need to ask ourselves why Christianity is excluded from the Alliance project. Is it not part of the West and its identity? Or should it be considered something dangerous to be excluded from public life? We need only return to the promoter of the Alliance, Prime Minister Zapatero to understand this point. If, in the 19th century, Marx held that all religion without exclusion were the “opium of the people”, Zapatero believes that religions are the “tobacco of the people”². The difference is that while opium is forbidden, tobacco is

² Reported by Massimo Introvigne, *Il Dramma dell’Europa senza Cristo* (The Drama of Europe without Christ), Sugarco, Milano, 2006

tolerated. It's bad for you; it damages your health and kills, as we can read on the packages as required by European legislation. In large parts of Europe it is banned from public places although not illegal it should be consumed in the open air or in private, for public health reasons. According to Zapatero, the same should apply to religions. They are dangerous and therefore should not be expressed in public but restricted to a wholly private life. This attitude is offensive, unjustifiably hostile and gratuitously offends millions of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu etc., faithful.

Zapatero should explain to believers of all religions how an Alliance of Civilisations can be based on the concept that 'religion is the tobacco of the people'. But given that this Alliance is about relations between the West and Islam he should also excuse himself to Christian and Muslim believers.

Let us continue with an analysis of the Report. What type of picture does it paint of the West? The Report presents a series of 'perceptions' that the Muslim world has of the West. These are not denied nor reappraised and therefore we can think that these preconceptions are shared by the HLG. Let us have a look at them.

Western powers, as we have said, have overwhelming political, economic and military power; uphold human rights when it is useful for them,

Support democracies but at the same time subverting democratically elected governments³.

Thanks to terrorism, the West considers Islam as 'inherently violent' whereas profound religious roots can be attributed to European colonialism.

Again, the difficult relations between the West and Islam began with

European imperialism, the resulting emergence of anti-colonial movements, and the legacy of the confrontations between them.

The West, as perceived by the Muslim world, is an accomplice of Israel in its occupation that

has been perceived in the Muslim world as a form of colonialism and has led many to believe, rightly or wrongly, that Israel is in collusion with "the West". These resentments and perceptions were further exacerbated by Israel's recent disproportionate retaliatory actions in Gaza and Lebanon.

Furthermore:

continuing occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territories and the unresolved status of Jerusalem - *a holy city for Muslims and Christians as well as Jews*⁴.

³ The reference seems to the 1991 Algerian elections and subsequent events.

⁴ The italics and the underlining are not of the text. I have held opportune to insert them to call the attention to a potentially dangerous sentence, in the actual political context. It points out, in fact, a Moslem supremacy, both on the Christianity and on the Judaism as it regards Jerusalem. The order doesn't respect the chronology, rather it reverses it. It

The Report talks of:

perception among Muslim societies of unjust aggression stemming from the West.

In the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, furthermore:

domination by Western countries over the past thirty years have been those led by religiopolitical- military movements and non-state actors. The ability of such groups, which are perceived to be militarily, economically, and politically overwhelmed by Western nations, to succeed through asymmetric warfare in resisting invasion and occupation, generates feelings of solidarity and support.

In the Report, these are Islamic ‘perceptions’ of the West. But what are the Western perceptions of Islam? There is no need to look for them as the Report does not mention them. Let's just list them: the sermons in the mosques that incite to the hate towards the west and the destruction of Israel, the discrimination towards the non-Moslems, the violence towards the women, the stone death for the women condemned for adultery, the sexual mutilations, the death sentence for the homosexuals, the polygamy, the combined marriages, and so on. A list that could implicate various pages of considerations.

We abstain from continuing because it is evident that by opposing perception to perception we can enter only an endless discussion that would bring to the clash rather than to the alliance. We will avoid doing so exactly as this would be counterproductive. There is evidently a methodological problem by the HLG. If the aim was to create an alliance, then that chosen by the HLG is completely inadequate.

It should be noted that the word ‘alliance’ is more associated with war than peace. However it is a pact between two or more parties for a common aim. To accomplish this aim, the parties need to share something. It would be inappropriate to define the EU as an alliance; however the term can be used to describe the pact based on the concept of solidarity between nations to which we will return to in the second paragraph. It was signed between States that decided to share certain aspects of their sovereignty to improve economic development by a process of integration. There is a well defined common aim to achieve, for that member countries must share values. That is those indicated in article 6 of the EU Treaty, article 2 of the European Constitution and in the second part of the Constitution, containing to the Chart of Fundamental Rights of the Union.

appears the will to shape an Islam dominated Alliance among Moslems and Christians against the Hebrews. Such a conception of the Alliance reflects the "dihmi", or rather the condition in which the not-Moslems live in a Moslem society. The “dihmi” enjoys *allowed rights*, that as such can be revoked in every moment. Such condition openly opposes with the UD as any person enjoys rights, *as such*. Nobody has to allow them because these rights are "previous to any jurisdiction."

In the case of the Alliance of Civilisations, the common aim is to improve the fact of peacefully living together by means of mutual understanding that leads to toleration. This can be achieved only by sharing values and a common denominator that cannot be found solely in the UD but must also be found by digging deeper into the identity of both parts, the Western and Moslem worlds. This could aid dialogue and also a comparison aimed at increasing a common platform by which to spread principles that can be considered indispensable for peaceful co-existence between believers of different faiths and non-believers.

However, the Report leaves little space for an alliance. The ‘perceptions’ sound like an accusation to the West, rather than a search for values to share. Reading the ‘perceptions’ a Muslim would find it difficult to find reasons for an alliance with someone who appears to be a thief, an enemy to be defended from and therefore to be rid of for his own safety. Thus, the West becomes something dangerous, just like the tobacco cited by Zapatero.

We cannot build anything on these premises, or at least nothing close to an alliance. Above all this is because in an alliance each member must be equal while in the Report there is a bad member still stained with blame, the West, and a good member, the Muslim world.

An alliance implies that each member maintains its own identity and explains this to the other who in their turn explains their own. An alliance needs pride and reciprocal respect for ones identity and culture from each of the participants. Today, the Muslim world is proud of its own identity, indeed it makes its religion the greater part of its identity that comes first and supplants other identities, including nationality. But what can we say of the West and in particular of Europe? It is lost in relativism that is alien to the Muslim world, impelled by a wild sense of urgency to place Christianity to one side, it does not know how to present itself to the Muslim world, except in the rags of self-blame (colonialism and imperialism) that only serves to ignore the pillars of Western civilisation. Indeed, it is a West that is as full of a sense of guilt as it is empty of a sense of identity. A West that, in Benedict XVI words, ‘cannot love itself’, and that exactly for this reason is unable to talk with the Muslim world.

To create a dialogue means for that both parts defend their own values and identity, to be able to look for a convergence on shared values. It is only in this way that we can have a common project that respects the values that each side recognises. The inter-civilisation dialogue is like a negotiation in which each side is convinced that only by sacrificing something can it obtain a greater benefit than that it has given up. But what is the use of a negotiation in which there are those such as the Muslim world who are proud of their own culture and those, such as ‘secular’ Europeans who prefer to hide it? Obviously there is none. Such unequal conditions cannot lead to any mutually agreeable cohabitation or respect but only to the predominance of one culture over the other, that is Islam over the West.

The Report makes only a few mentions of the European Union. He completely ignores the role that European integration has had and continues to have in creating prosperity and peaceful co-existence between its members. It also ignores the role of the EU in resolving and managing

conflicts, peace-building and keeping from the Balkans to South east Asia over the last twenty years that has even been deeply appreciated by Muslim academics and politicians⁵. It is enough to remember the words expressed by the Pakistani Foreign Minister Baktiar in November 2005: “The European Union has become the global model for integration of states and societies to promote peace and stability in the world, not only through preventing and helping to resolve conflicts, but also, by promoting *harmony between cultures and faiths*⁶” (italics not in the original text).

In substance, it ignores the external projection of the concept of solidarity between nations that is the base of the entire European construction. This is an important lacuna as this external projection could and should have been the instrument to create an Alliance of Civilisations, giving instead the EU an extremely modest role.

Indeed, at least on paper, this lacuna has left out an important ally in terms of the aims that have been proposed.

Even the choice of the term ‘alliance’ is rather dubious. In its historical use it is a term used in time of war or in defence against an external threat and so is usually military in context. This term can be used as opposite to the term conflict. The term alliance implies the existence of a conflict, real or potential, that must be faced or prevented. An alliance, in itself does not imply the equal dignity between its members as in history there are many examples of alliances dominated by one country that ‘leads’ the lesser members. An Alliance of Civilisations thus seems to be a very evasive definition.

In the next chapter we will discuss the concept of Solidarity between Civilisations. For the moment we just notice that, solidarity is a value uniting people by creating mutual aid relations. Solidarity implies mutual respect. Solidarity is an on par pact, there is no dominant part. Solidarity is above all an encounter of different identities sharing the desire to deep mutual knowledge.

However, as we have seen before, the contents of the Report seems to perfectly fulfil the equivocal nature of the term alliance. An initiative that should be between equals has become one with one dominant and one dominated member, one which is well defined while the other is rather blurred.

Under these conditions, two results are possible: The prevalence of Muslim over Western culture, given the submission of the latter; or the breaking of the Alliance in a fit of pride, very different and uncontrollable from that pride we have already mentioned, with all its possible consequences. That is, the Alliance of Civilisations could either be the tomb of Western culture or a spark for the conflict of civilisations. Both

⁵ For a clear idea of how the Muslim world has appreciated Europe’s role in peace-keeping, even with inevitable caution and constructive criticism, see: “The Role of Europe in Conflict Resolution, Conflict Management, Peace-building and Peace-keeping from Balkans to South East Asia”. Edited by Naveed Ahmad Tahir, Area Study Centre for Europe, University of Karachi, Karachi 2006.

⁶ Naveed Ahmad Tahir, *Op.Cit.* page xviii.

cases would give a result that is at variance with that originally proclaimed.

Probably, it will be neither one nor the other but simply a failure which would be the best of all possible results, i.e., a programme without any effect what-so-ever. One of the many failures of the UN, that in its sixty years of existence has been unable to produce peace in the world.

A very different prospective could have been achieved with a balanced programme created in a different institutional context. This is what we will see in the following paragraph

2. Solidarity between Civilisations

Here we propose the alternative view of Solidarity between Civilisations. Actually the proposal is not a new one, but older than the Alliance of Civilisations.

It was firstly advanced, in a written form, in the seminar of the European Commission: "Dialogue Between Peoples and Culture: Actors in the Dialogue", organized by the General Directorate for Culture and Education on 24-25 May 2004. The title of that communication is "A Magna Europe for Solidarity Between Civilisations"⁷. That article had a foregoing and a following.

In the early summer of 2002, visiting Hagia Sophia, I stopped to look at the apse where there is a Byzantine mosaic of the Virgin and Child and two great wooden disks with the names of Mohammed and Allah, from the Ottoman period. That combination of Christian and Muslim sacred art symbolised the peaceful co-existence of religions, cultures and civilisations. I believed that Justinian's cathedral of Hagia Sophia, which had been the principal church of Christendom for 900 years and, after the fall of Constantinople, had been converted into a Mosque, could be a symbol of the sorely needed solidarity between civilisations. By going beyond this symbolism it could return to being a place of worship open to faithful of both religions, Christian and Muslim.

It was then that I began to work on the concept of solidarity between civilisations. That is, a pact in the form of a programme between parties who are absolutely convinced that only dialogue, exchange of experiences, cultural comparison and reflections on identity and the spread of these concepts, could develop mutual trust and respect between the West with its roots based in Christianity and the Muslim world.

In particular, solidarity between civilisations represents an evolution of Jean Monnet's concept of solidarity among nations. The European Coal and Steel Treaty (1951) and the European Economic Community (1957),

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/education/programmes/ajm/organisation/people_culture/contributions/angelo_santagostino_en.pdf

were founded as intra-civilisation projects, as indeed it could not have been otherwise; and it worked very well. In the new millennium, many things have changed. The ever increasing immigration from Muslim countries, the fifth EU enlargement, the candidate status of countries such as Turkey and Macedonia and the potentialities of the other Western Balkan countries becoming candidates, have all enhanced the need to evolve from the concept of solidarity between nations (not to substitute but to add) to the concept of solidarity between civilisations.

Precisely to underline the fact that two civilisations, the Christian West and Islam must find a way to peacefully co-exist for the political, social and economic development, not only of the EU but also of its immediate neighbours. It is here that Turkey, with its Euro-Asian heritage, has an important role to play.

This idea, together with others was expressed at an international seminar on Italian-Turkish relations organised by the University of Marmara in Istanbul on the 7th-8th March 2003. Here, the concept that Europe needed to rediscover its own lost identity was conjugated with the fact of being able to talk with the Muslim world. I underlined that while the Muslim world is proud of its own heritage and identity, we have lost that pride. Our consciousness is ever decreasing exactly because we have cut our Christian roots. Under these conditions dialogue is not possible.

In the following months, I worked to convert the concept of solidarity between civilisations into a programme and to work out a project in which this idea could be expressed.

My reflections were first expressed in the already mentioned seminar of European Commission. The final version was published in October 2004 in the Marmara Journal of European Studies (n° 1-2, 2004) entitled: "A Magna Europe for Solidarity Between Civilisations: Programme, Project and Symbol".

In that article Solidarity between Civilisation was defines as:

a pact, an alliance between those who belong to one or another culture, i.e. the West and Islam, who are convinced that only by *deeply believing in the values of their own culture and horizontal values such as tolerance, reciprocal respect and understanding*, will they be able to create civil co-existence, indispensable for peace.

The article besides developing the concept of Solidarity between Civilisations, traced a programme, pointing out that a high level group should define the details:

The creation of a solidarity between European and Muslim Civilizations calls for the launching of an envelope programme in the field of cultural cooperation. Its name could be Civi-link, to underline the fact that its main purpose is that of establishing a solid link between the two Civilizations. Civi-link should be conceived as an instrument to prevent the clash of civilizations by strengthening and enhancing cultural relationships between EU and Islamic Countries and peoples, through promotion of a better knowledge and understanding of the

European and Islamic civilizations. This can be considered as the programme's general objective.⁸

The specific objectives can be indicated as follows:

1. promoting in the EU's Member and Candidates States (EUMCS) and in Islamic Countries studies on the relations between East and West and on the heritage and essence of the European and Islamic Civilizations;
2. Promoting in EUMCS and in Islamic Countries the inter-religious dialogue;
3. Promoting in the EUMCS and in Islamic Countries the studies on Democracy and Human Rights;
4. Promoting in the EUMCS and in Islamic Countries the dissemination of information, for the general public and certain target groups, on the basic elements of the European and Islamic Civilizations;

The following can be indicated as expected results:

1. Greater knowledge about the constituting elements (cultural identity) of the two civilizations;
2. Higher consciousness of the common religious values shared by the two civilizations;
3. Higher level of mutual understanding and tolerance between the two civilizations;
4. Higher and more diffused respect for human rights;
5. Enhancement of democracy.

In order to obtain these results the following actions, in form of projects, will have to be implemented:

1. Education at University level: programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate level focused on subject linked to subjects leading to results 1,4 and 5;
2. Education at school level:
 - 2.1 Courses for school teachers leading to result 1 and 3;
 - 2.2 Courses realised by the teachers trained under 2.1, leading to result 1 and 3;
3. Seminars, conferences and meetings realised jointly by exponents and/or communities of the three religions, leading to result 2;
4. Seminars, conferences and meetings realised jointly by NGOs, leading to results 4 and 5.

A high level group of experts set up by the European Commission will have to define the details of this Programme.

The Commission's proposal will have to be submitted to the European Parliament and to the EU Council.

It then presented, in a good deal of detail, an ambitious project of a further education institute of European and Euro-Asian studies to be located in Turkey.

Finally I proposed, as symbol of Solidarity Between Civilisations, Hagia Sophia.

⁸ We remind that the global objective are those whose level is beyond that of the programme (or project). This means that other programmes (or projects) are contributing to the achievement of this global objective. Specific objectives are those who have to be attained during the intervention.

Making Hagia Sophia the symbol of solidarity between civilizations and in perspective the place of open worship of the two religions where the faithful of both can show their faith, would be a decisive wave for the dialogue between Eastern and Western culture, between Europe and Asia, Christianity and Islam.

I sent both the on-line and paper version of that article to many of my colleagues as well as members of the European Parliament and the European Commission. I had no replies apart from one Spanish MEP of the PPE who congratulated me for the article.

On 21st September 2004, the Spanish Prime Minister Zapatero launched the idea of an Alliance between Civilisations at the United Nations, “between the West and the Arab and Muslim world.” In March 2005, the prime minister Erdogan announced Turkey’s adhesion to the project. Subsequently a HLG was created in the UN that produced the Report discussed in the previous section.

At the same time there began to circulate rumours about the possibility of re-opening Hagia Sophia to worship of both faiths. Also the possibility of admitting Muslim worship in the Cathedral of Cordoba, was also talked about.

Conclusions

The programme, ‘Solidarity between Civilisations’ was thought of as the EU’s response to the most difficult challenge to the XXIst century, terrorism (actually I used the expression pseudo-Islamic terrorism, just to underline the fact that those who kill in name of God are no part of any religion). As such it should have been, in my proposal, a part of the external activities of the Commission directed towards the Muslim world. It was the occasion for the EU to promote action that both sides felt the need for.

The Philosophy in the Report of 13th November is mostly deluding.

In the part dedicated to basic principles, the absolute lack of any meaningful reference to the European culture and identity emerges, but Europe is presented simply as a colonial and imperial power.

There are no references to the Christian roots of Europe that is its fundamental element. What is worse is that a Muslim who reads these pages could only have a worse concept of the Western World and European civilisation. For a Muslim, the clear impression is of a decadent continent, above all from a moral view, or better a continent without morals.

Concerning UD and the rights contained in it, where they come from is not mentioned. Values without a theory, without roots. For the non-believer this can be sufficient. However for the believers there is a transcendence linking these values to the Creator, who is the original source. A link uniting Christians, Jews and Muslims.

The concrete risk of this strictly secular formulation of the UD is to propose to the Moslems the image of Europe, or in general a West, arrogant, or even a something more:

A West that in his secularistic approach ends up making himself a God, or at least putting himself at the level of a God, because as God is a allow acknowledge to humanity universal values without giving them any superior reference.

Finally, let us return to Hagia Sophia. To open it to the two religions is an arrival point, not a departure. For this it should be above all a symbol and only later a place of common worship once solidarity has been established. To open it suddenly to the two religions could create serious problems.

The European Union has lost a great chance by not starting the project of solidarity between civilisations, but it still has time to do so.

The UN has been often under attack as a useless institution. This time it has shown itself to be not so much useless but actually dangerous.