# LEARN TO LIVE WITH DIVERSITY

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Forgetting the myths that no longer serve us is essential, but in itself it is not enough. We must also adopt values and beliefs that are better in tune with our world. It is to these that we now turn.

> *~ People in the United States and Europe tend to think that everybody wants to live and be like them, . . . but a great deal of diversity remains in people's views of themselves, of society, of nature, and of freedom and justice. . . . Notwithstanding the spread of MacDonaldism, worldwide Coca-Colonization, the Internet, and the emergence of global markets, the contemporary world is becoming more rather than less diverse. ~*

The cultural diversity of the contemporary world is frequently underestimated. People in the United States and Europe tend to think that everybody wants to live and be like them – the rest is but sophistry and pretense. It is true that the level of consumption, material aspirations and technology, and the values of the industrialized world are dominant, but a great deal of diversity remains in people's views of themselves, of society, of nature, and of freedom and justice. Disregarding, or just underestimating, the world's cultural diversity produced blood-baths in Ireland, the Middle East, the Arab world, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia.

The disregard of entrenched cultural differences also led to the Yugoslav cataclysm that erupted in I999. In the Balkans two different cultures have coexisted since Constantine divided the Roman Empire: the Roman Catholic and the Greek Orthodox. When the Ottomans entered Bosnia in the fifteenth century, these two cultures were joined by a third: Islam. They clashed time and time again. Tito's fight, first against the Nazi invaders and then against the imperialistic Soviet superpower, unified the clashing factions, but when Tito died and the external enemy vanished, ethnic animosities erupted again. A recognition of these cultural factors could have led to a better policy in regard to the Serb leadership than armed intervention by foreign powers.

Whether in the Balkans, in the Middle East, or elsewhere in the Southern Hemisphere, there is a need for a better understanding of the differences that mark today's cultures and ethnic groups. Notwithstanding the spread of MacDonaldisms, worldwide Coca-Colonization, the Internet, and the emergence of global markets, the contemporary world is becoming more rather than less diverse. In the southern half of the Americas, for example, a new brand of cultural nationalism is emerging. Latin Americans resent their dependence on North America and also resent being receivers rather than producers of the cultural currents that shape the contemporary world. Foreign cultural domination is an agonizing issue for Arabs as well, who perceive it as an element of Western hegemony vis-á-vis their countries. They fend themselves at the passive end of an intercultural dialogue that links them almost exclusively with Western Europe and North America. Militant fundamentalism is an extreme expression of the resentment generated by these conditions.

India and the countries of South Asia have had prolonged contact with British culture, but despite their admiration and assimilation of many of its traits, these cultures are intent on protecting their own heritage. In Russia, in turn, historical experience has made for a profound ambivalence regarding Western culture, an attitude that persists to this day. Its main elements are admiration for the achievements of the West in technology as well as in high culture and fear that these achievements will overwhelm the Russian cultural heritage and the identity it bestows on people.

Admiration mixed with fear is also a hallmark of the cultures of the young nations of sub-Saharan Africa. Though avid consumers of industrial culture, some Africans are increasingly intent on fortifying their own cultural heritage. While the poor segment of the population remains steeped in traditional beliefs and ways of life, a small élite of intellectuals searches for the roots of African racial identity and a still smaller élite of political leaders is concerned above all with its people's national identity.

Contrasts with the Western way of seeing oneself and the world, though not always recognized, surface on every continent. Latin Americans have a more highly developed sense of spirituality than the people of North America. This has historical roots, with transcendentalist elements of Latin culture dating back to the fifteenth century. Throughout the South American continent the Catholic scholasticism of the European Middle Ages was more than a monastic philosophy: it was a cognitive system intrinsic to state and society that governed every aspect of life. Subservience to ecclesiastical authority, like subservience to God and King, became axiomatic in the morality of everyday life. Even when the colonial epoch drew to a close, no accommodation took place between the scholastic legacy and modern scientific thought. Anglo-Saxon pragmatism,

rooted in the application of the concepts and methods of the natural sciences to the material spheres of life, has never taken hold in the Latin parts of the hemisphere.

Though in a different form, transcendentalism is also a feature of the Hindu and Buddhist cultures of the Indian subcontinent. It focuses people's attention on spiritual matters and functions as a counterweight to the rising materialism and consumerism of the "modernized" sector. In the Muslim culture, transcendentalism combines with monotheism, and in Sufism it acquires a mystical streak. Mysticism is prevalent also in the indigenous cultures of black Africa. These cultures have always been spiritualistic and animistic, and these features have not been eliminated in the traditional sectors of the population by the zeal of Christian missionaries, nor have they been overcome by the marketing propaganda of transnational corporations.

The Oriental mind conserves many aspects of its traditional beliefs. The great cultural circle that radiated from China during the last millennium was shaped by the naturalism of Lao Tse, the social discipline of Confucius, and the Buddha's quest for personal enlightenment. In the twentieth century these cultural origins branched in different directions, giving rise to the orthodox culture of Mao's Yanan, the pragmatic culture of Hong Kong's Kong-Tai, and the mix of naturalism, Confucianism, and Buddhism that characterizes the culture of contemporary Japan. The Kong-Tai and Japanese branches of the Chinese cultural tradition maintain a penchant for all things concrete and practical, so it is not surprising that societies where these strong traditions have held sway had no difficulty in adopting, or even improving upon, Western technology – even if they could not avoid the negative consequences of a technology-based market economy. These cultures became "modernized" but not westernized. Oriental work habits, group loyalties, and lifestyles remain culture-specific to this day, and they differ from those current in Europe and North America.

The materialistic individualism and pragmatism of Western culture is not monolithic even in Europe and the United States. It is tempered with religious beliefs centered on the existence of God and a pantheon of saints or prophets. It exhibits a penchant for embracing the five "malignant myths" discussed earlier, together with many of the other beliefs best forgotten. None of these mesh with the reality of the contemporary world; they are articles of faith. Nonetheless, they continue to influence Western people's values and behaviour.

Finding unity within the diversity of the contemporary world is essential for assuring the chances of life, or just of survival, for all the people of the human family. One such potential for unity is the need for cooperation among the

world's diverse peoples and cultures. The basic resources of the planet – air, water, soil, mineral resources, and energy – must be shared by all people, regardless of their level of industrialization and economic development. But if all people are to have access to these resources, economies, enterprises, and states must not engage in the obsolete strategy of outcompeting each other for access to them. Instead, they must cooperate with each other to ensure that everybody has enough access to live and develop.

Governments and managers need to change their focus from "win-lose" games to "win-win" games where everybody benefits. Many such games can be played. For example, the exploitation, use, and discard of material resources can be structured so that the benefit of one also spells benefit for others. The same goes for the use of the planet's atmosphere, soils, and energy sources. Family planning and the environment are certainly areas where both sides can win: an environment with modest population growth offers better access to resources for everyone.

> *~ A peaceful and sustainable world is not built by eliminating cultural differences but by cooperation that makes productive use of them. ~*

National and international security have often been considered a playing field for win-lose games. If I win by conquering you, your territory, your people, and your resources, you lose in all these respects. Yet in the contemporary world of interdependence, peace and security are a requirement for all people, and assuring them is of benefit to everyone. Cooperation in the area of collective peacekeeping can create a more solid foundation for peace and security than mutual distrust balanced by armed forces.

The way to play win-win games is to:
- share useful skills, technologies, and capital with poorer or less developed partners;
- channel investment into education, communication, human resource development and economic and social infrastructure;
- create a joint peacekeeping system instead of investing in nuclear, biological, chemical, and conventional weapons;
- have fewer children in rapidly growing high-fertility populations; and
- respect the balances and thresholds that are vital to the integrity of nature.

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The second of the new imperatives of our time is to recognize, respect, and through win-win strategies make proper use of the diversity of the cultures, nations, and peoples of today's world.

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