Pluralism: Engaging Difference in an Interdependent World

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The plurality of peoples and cultures has come to characterise every part of the world today. No longer can maps be colour-coded to indicate the population of each major continent and sector. In fact, every part of the world is swirling with the colours and textures of the whole. Communications and migration have brought disparate cultures and energies into constant proximity and contact. Living with diversity and difference – creatively, sympathetically and wisely – is the challenge of the decades ahead.

The world of the twenty-first century has been transformed in almost unimaginable ways by the currents of globalisation, communications and migration. The satellite and fibre-optic technologies that span the continents and the oceans have brought the world closer – the global world, the immediate world of our own society, the local worlds we call home. Powerful communications networks create worldwide markets, deploy worldwide advertising strategies and become worldwide news-brokers. Brazilian soap operas are seen in Turkey, American sitcoms in South India. Headlines from South Africa, cricket scores from Karachi and breaking news from Iran pop up on the smartphones nestled in our pockets.

Banking, commerce, manufacturing and transportation create global networks, connected and interconnected. For better or for worse, OshKosh B’gosh stores for children’s clothing can be found in glitzy malls in Kuala Lumpur; Kentucky Fried Chicken and Dunkin’ Donuts in the streets of Yogyakarta. Taj Hotels provide refuge and luxury worldwide and Mahindra tractors are the best-selling tractors everywhere. American architectural firms contract for design projects in China and India, while Indian call centres process travel reservations for Americans. Consumers and manufacturers are interconnected and inextricably interdependent.

Along with the revolutions in communications and commerce, the mass movement of peoples as economic migrants and refugees has transformed societies the world over. In the United States, the 1965 Immigration and Nationalities Act opened the door to immigrants from Asia who had long been subject to harsh exclusion policies. In addition to the many new post-1965 immigrants from India and China, refugees have settled in America from war-torn countries in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. All this has infused American cities and towns with a fresh mix of peoples, and a more complex cultural, religious and architectural landscape has emerged. Alongside the churches there are now thousands of mosques, temples and gurdwaras, many transformed from other uses, but increasingly purpose-built and designed as new landmarks.
In Europe, formerly homogeneous European societies find themselves challenged – and perplexed – by a new and unaccustomed diversity. There are Hindu temples in Bern and Strasbourg, landmark mosques and Islamic centres in Lyon and London, and debates about the minaret in Switzerland. Nations that have imagined their community along more unitary lines are today factually multifaith and multicultural. But holding together cultural, ethnic, religious difference under a shared political roof is no small task. What does it mean to be Swedish? To be French or British? Who decides? What does it mean to be a citizen in the context of a society in which one’s co-citizens may not share one’s own deeply held values or cultural traditions? What does it mean to give positive expression to diversity – in the arts and in education, in architecture and in the urban landscape?

The process of globalisation has meant the marbling of cultures and communities in new ways. Even as people wrestle with the contentious issues of diversity, they are often brought together by the energies of popular culture and food. Bollywood and bhangra, tai-chi and yoga, salsa and burritos, chicken tikka masala and naan, halal and kosher have all become standard in the cultural mix. But while we may eat one another’s food and dance one another’s dances, we have not boldly addressed the deep differences that divide the world. Our ignorance and prejudice circle the globe along with our credit card numbers and our greenhouse gases. The globalisation of our imagination, our artistic vision, our conscience and consciousness is still underdeveloped. The moral and cultural implications of globalisation are little explored. As nations and peoples, we understand one another too little.

Diversity can and has meant the creation of ghettos with little traffic between them. It can and has meant the building of fences to ensure that those who are different are kept in their own backyard. It can and has meant the dominance of the majority and the grudging acquiescence of minority communities. It can and has meant open conflict and even war. Diversity is a given, everywhere. But alone, it means nothing. Diversity is only the raw material of cultures that now must develop an ethos of pluralism.

Diversity without real encounters or relationships will yield increasing tensions in our societies. Pluralism, on the other hand, means engagement with the other, a decision not to avoid or avert, but rather to reach out. As His Highness the Aga Khan has put it, ‘Pluralism results when people decide to value and understand human differences through mutual respect and civic inclusion.’ Unlike diversity, pluralism is not a given; it is a choice and an achievement.

A further definition of pluralism is that it is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. Though tolerance is perhaps a necessary public virtue, especially considered in the light of intolerance, it does not require us to know anything about one another. It is also a perspective held from a disequilibrium of power: the influential may tolerate what they do not like, while the powerless may tolerate what is dished out to them. Put up with it, but don’t investigate further – in pulling down the shades of our vision, mere tolerance cheats us of the experience of astonishment as we discover the daily lives, creative achievements and artistic genius of those we tolerate as the ‘other’. And, of course, tolerance is too thin a foundation for the world of difference and proximity we inhabit today. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, to counter our lack of appreciation for each other’s aesthetic, literary and architectural traditions. Depriving societies of the genius of our own diversity, mere tolerance simply leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence, with increasingly costly consequences.

For critics, the very word ‘pluralism’ seems to imply a weak form of relativism, the compromise of one’s principles and visions in the search for the lowest common denominator. For some, the very word implies that all worldviews and perspectives are the same. But let us emphasise that pluralism begins with difference, not with sameness, and the paradigm of pluralism does not require us to leave behind our identities, our philosophical or religious views, our cherished particularities and our commitments. No, pluralism is the encounter of commitments, the genuine encounter of who we really are. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another. It may well involve argument over very significant matters: How do we understand our human relation to nature and the environment? How do we envision a complex community, a diverse urban environment? What do we value most in family and community life? What do we see as beautiful and artistically elevating? Pluralism does not reach for the lowest common denominator, but for the highest level of mutual understanding and the appreciation of difference.

Thus pluralism is dependent on dialogue. The language of pluralism is that of give and take, criticism and self-criticism, argument and sometimes
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Pluralism involves the commitment to being ‘at the table’ – with one’s commitments and perspectives, and with openness towards the others who are present. The ‘table’ of which we speak is sometimes a real sit-down-and-talk table, but more often the sites of encounter are to be found in every sector of our society – in our neighbourhoods and malls, schools and universities, hospitals and wellness centres, the workplace and the office, city councils and zoning boards, planning and development projects. These are workshops of pluralism where the language of dialogue is spoken. It is the language of respectful relationship, and pluralism requires of us this kind of relational ethos and sensibility.

His Highness the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslims, has become one of the great spokesmen for pluralism today. Involved as he is in issues of education, healthcare and development the world over, he sees from experience that the contemporary world absolutely requires the nurturing of pluralist societies. ‘It is my conviction’, he says, ‘that strengthening institutions that support pluralism is as critical for the welfare and progress of human society as are alleviating poverty and preventing conflict. In fact, all three are intimately related.’ Yet at a time when the interdependence of societies is a clear and salient fact of global order, we still hear the strident voices of those who insist upon singular social identities and the dominance of majorities. As the Aga Khan puts it, ‘The rejection of pluralism is pervasive across the globe, and this rejection plays a significant role in breeding destructive conflicts.’

Pluralist societies do not just happen by themselves. Rather, they are, as the Aga Khan has noted, ‘products of enlightened education and continuous investment by governments and all of civil society in recognising and celebrating the diversity of the world’s peoples’. For people in all walks of life, investing in a future in which diversity is not divisive means imagining and designing institutions, public and private, that are inclusive and give expression to an ethos of respect for diversity of people and communities.

The Centre for Pluralism, launched by the Aga Khan and located in Ottawa, has given a rationale for developing a culture of inclusion:

– When valued rather than feared, human diversity enriches and benefits a society.

– Having difference recognised by the state and the nation fosters belonging, participation and equality.

– Cultures of inclusion do not erase difference or disagreement; rather, they offer ways to manage conflict peacefully.

– Majority identities and minority aspirations must be considered.

– Pluralist societies require ongoing work and investment – by citizens, civil societies and governments – but the returns are enormous.

The American sociologist Richard Florida writes of what he calls the ‘diversity advantage’ of cities. Diverse cities are more likely to attract a ‘creative class’ of people – themselves cosmopolitan, inventive and artistic – who are more likely to thrive in a culture of complexity, difference, exchange and cooperation. Studying old cosmopolitan cities as well as the multicultural cities of today, Florida sees a positive correlation between a city’s success and the appreciation of diversity. In his study, The Rise of the Creative Class, he draws an explicit correlation between economic development and a welcoming cultural climate that crosses boundaries and attracts creative talent.

The city is what the sociologist Lewis Mumford called ‘energy converted into culture’. Today, great world-cities like New York, London, Mumbai or Shanghai and countless smaller cities the world over are swirling with the energies of their diversity. These are the workshops of pluralism, where visionary leadership is challenged to create the human and physical infrastructure of relationship – the civic networks, the bridges, the housing blocks and the institutions of education and the arts. The Aga Khan sums up the challenge:

‘Pluralism results when a society actively reorients its political, social, economic and educational systems to recognise and secure the equality of every person as a citizen. Pluralism does not erase human differences. A commitment to pluralism redefines diversity as a collective source of common good. When valued and enabled through the practices of pluralism, diversity is a foundation for civic cohesion.’