

Opinion

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Practical Suggestions for Preventing Conflicts through a Better Understanding of Culture and Differences: Tips, Anecdotes, and the Impact of Public Events

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ABSTRACT

One of the best strategies of working with conflict is its prevention. Several practical suggestions on how we can know our neighbors better and have a personal engagement in dialogue between people of different cultures are shared in this paper with the hope of achieving world peace through little steps in the elimination of conflicts and prevention of violence. These tips include interchange of information about our respective cultures, use of the internet and other technical mass media, travelling and living together, mastering other languages, ecumenical approaches to others' religions, etc.

INTRODUCTION

The ambiguity and complexity of the notion of conflict and our lack of understanding of its nature often leads to inadequate and inappropriate reactions to it. In other words, a better understanding of it will pave the way to non-coercitive solutions and give rise to the possibility of dialogue in its stead.¹

Conflict is a ubiquitous phenomenon,^{2,3} which can be found at all levels of life, from the intrapersonal one, within our own organism, where immune reactions may lead to illnesses and conflicting inner desires often show up as a lack of harmony, to international relations between world powers, where the protagonists aim in finding substantive negotiated solutions to both technical and political issues in order to avoid wars, such as the recent agreement on Iran Nuclear Talks,⁴ passing through many other intermediate levels –interpersonal, social, and so on. A proactive and supportive attitude in finding the best positive space for solutions to conflict is offered at all scientific levels, from the most diverse disciplines: psychobiology, psychiatry,⁵ sociology, law (conflict resolution is its *raison d'être*), policy science, etc.⁶

The main purpose of the present article is to offer a pragmatic approach, based on personal experiences in cross-cultural research,⁷⁻¹⁰ by sharing some tips, anecdotes, and the eventual impact on public events. Hopefully some of these personal hints might serve professionals and other readers interested in promoting a better dialogue between different cultures thus going a little way towards solving conflicts, preventing violence, and achieving peace through tolerance. A few of these more practical initiatives that we can personally undertake are mentioned below.

Travelling

*“El andar tierras y comunicar con diversas gentes
hace a los hombres discretos”*

(Traversing countries and communicating with different
people,
makes human beings tactful and discreet)
(Miguel de Cervantes)

Learning about the cultures, customs and religions of our neighbours helps us to understand them better. Encouraging ourselves and others to take the opportunity to cross borders in order to engage, learn from, and listen to how various ethnic groups negotiate and translate their histories, differences, and voices within and across an over-arching polity.

When people visit other countries, the frame of reference of their stories or experiences are often statements in relation to their own customs. “The physical theory of relativity is a very useful example of the danger of thought-habits closing our minds to new truths. We all of us tend to judge problems from one particular stand point – the one determined by our own conditions of life. We are inhabitants of our own particular country, with a particular religion and moral tradition, and we are inclined to forget how many of our judgements are simply relative to this single standpoint and are not absolute. It is only when we begin to study comparative religions and comparative codes of morals that we begin to see to what extent our own opinions about right and wrong and about other matters are not based on scientific truths (for these are true for all persons under all conditions), but are judgements whose truth is relative to the particular view or ‘truth’ from which they were made. By accustoming our minds to comparative studies and by forming the habit of trying to look at problems in a manner which discounts our own point of view, we can to some extent escape from this relativity”¹¹ We must remember this relativity in our point of view.

In this context, fostering visits by young people to foreign countries is an essential element in the effort to strengthen mutual understanding among different civilizations, because these ‘well travelled’ youth later might hold leading positions in their own countries: government, university, law practices, non-profit organizations, art, culture.

After travelling around the world, I have realized that the essential truths human beings have worried about are practically the same in all cultures: love, life, survival, death, after-life. Had I previously felt some nationalism or xenophobia in the deepest of my being, it has completely disappeared. Nowadays, I feel myself to be a real citizen of the world. I try to follow what Confucius taught: “The superior man is universal and not partisan. The mean man is a partisan and not universal.”¹²

Interchange of Cultural Videos, as a Less Expensive Alternative

A less expensive way to promote tolerance and knowledge of other cultures is watching documental movies about them. A good example of it may be the World Video Exchange Programme carried out by UNESCO. It consists of the interchange of 15 minutes videos on the life of adolescents and how they see their own countries. This project has only started in the most economically developed societies where technology is available. In the West and in Japan there are already palm size video-cameras at a quite reasonable price being used by youngsters (remember the phenomenon of the *tamagotchi*), which could be easily used for this purpose. Given globalization, this idea will soon spread around the world, for instance through I-phones and the like. Wait and see!

Impact of ‘Visible Catastrophes’ on Public Perception

People of a certain age remember what were they doing at the very moment of the first landing on the moon. We also have witnessed catastrophes directly through television. I remember the tragedy of the Heysel Stadium, in Brussels (1985), immediately before the final match of the soccer Europe Cup, where 39 spectators died. I also have in mind the American attacks against Baghdad, during the Gulf war, or the Russians against Grosznik, in Chechnya; or the long scene of the killing of a Palestinian young boy, close to his father who was asking the Israeli troops to stop shooting. But what happened on September 11, 2001 was certainly the most spectacular and horrible example. We will never forget those frightful images of smoke, fire, explosions, people jumping from windows, running towards nowhere, with their eyes full of terror, a collapse of the very symbols of economic and military power in America. This was partially due to the immediate presence of mass media, serving as a terrible, large scale mirror image of what unfortunately was already the experience of many other recent mass killing outside the developed world – whether accidental as in Bhopal, natural-disasters as in Guatemala or India, or planned as in Rwanda, Tibet, Sudan, ISIS and related.

This impact of ‘visible catastrophes’ on public perception can also be used in a constructive way to eliminate conflict through understanding its roots in human behaviour, as suggested by Robert Hinde (personal communication). The continuous media coverage of the attack on the World Trade Center towers has brought a large portion of people to a state of acute empathy with the victims. When that kind of things happens, the concept of solidarity gets a new meaning. We all then become the ‘victim’ and want to overthrow the ‘enemy’.

Mastering Several Languages

One of the main tools necessary for a ‘dialogue inter civilizations’ is the mastering of foreign languages. The capacity

of speaking and reading in several languages is clearly a good achievement, because it allows us not only to understand what other people think, but also how they think, which is even more important. For instance, I think in the language which I speak in each specific moment. And I feel myself German when I listen to Beethoven or to a Schubert's *Lieder*; Italian when I read *I Promessi Sposi* or *La Divina Commedia*; Danish when I speak with my Scandinavian wife; or English when I write this paper. And I never have the impression that through this I am being unfaithful to Spain, nor more importantly to my own I, but the contrary.

I found an article on the Internet, written by Rajeev Srinivassan, a South Indian whose maternal language was Malayalam, the language of the state of Kerala. "As a person completely bilingual in English and Malayalam – he was writing, I can say with certainty that, for me, that Malayalam is the language of the heart and English is the language of the head."¹³ The maternal language is related to history, culture, literature, and identity. And the *lingua franca* helps to communicate with a wider world. This is a big advantage for the 'flying Dutchman', the 'wandering Jew' or anyone living out of a suitcase: if they are going to be travelling around, they are obliged to manage in at least one language other than their own.

But it is not easy, indeed, to manage in several languages. I have personally experienced the difficulty of translating from one language to another. Books of mine, first published in English, have been translated into my mother tongue by somebody else; I was not able to do it myself. There is usually significant damage done to in the process of translating from one language to another. For instance, some languages seem to me better suited for one culture, and seem to falter when asked to communicate another person's world view. There are a number of *faux amis* that can provoke many an embarrassing misunderstanding: if you compliment a Frenchman for being 'candid', he will unhappily understand *naïve*; if you compliment a Spaniard for being 'versatile', he will take to mean 'volatile' or an inconsistent *veleta*, a 'fickle' person. I always remember the perplexed face of my old South African auntie when, wanting to compliment her for her cheerfulness, enthusiasm and energy, I told her that she was 'juvenile', *juvenil* as we would have said as a compliment in Spanish. Equally, as a joke, I do also remember when several Spanish youngsters – me included – travelling through Italy asked practically every waiter for butter – *burro* in Italian, not because we wanted it, but just because such a word was one of the biggest insults in our own language: stupid! This was really a juvenile behaviour, far from the lovely joyfulness of my dearest auntie.

I have also read some anecdotes about the embarrassment of some sellers of Japanese cars, due to the different meanings or 'sounds' in different languages. A splendid model of sportive Toyota was presented in the Saloon de l'Automobil, in Paris, with its technical abbreviation: 'MR2'. It elicited quite unexpected burlesque smiles when its name was announced in French: it sounded very similar to a well known but not desired expression: *merde*! A similar thing occurred when Mitsubishi

tried to introduce a jeep into the Spanish market with a name equally unacceptable in that language: *Pajero* is a word that in my language is associated with a vulgar term for the individual who masturbates. I try to remember they changed its name into *Montero*. The habit of using words with several meanings not clearly distinguished therefore may lead us into much erroneous thinking and embarrassing misunderstandings.

An encouragement for the learning of foreign languages through a variety of activities, such as theatre plays, *karaoke*, or films in original version with subtitles, may also contribute to a better understanding and tolerance among people of different linguistic and cultural origin.

Good Living Together

A practical aspect in constructing peace demands the co-operation of all participating parties, in a similar way to genes which work together within an organism, instead of fighting for their own survival and spreading.¹⁴

A macro-policy against discrimination orchestrated by the government is not enough. Small-scale initiatives by ordinary people are also necessary, and perhaps even more effective. Each individual has to do his/her bit to foster good relations with people from other cultures. Sharing is a way of keeping the peace with potentially hostile neighbours.

My own country may be mentioned as a historical pioneer in the dialogue between civilizations. Centuries ago, during the medieval period, when wars were ubiquitous in Europe, Spain (simultaneously known as *Iberia*, *Sefarad*, and *Al Andalus*) had people from 'the three cultures' happily living together for centuries. Muslims, Christians and Jews were sharing a common life. For example, in the 10th century, the Caliph of Cordova, Abderraman III, the Emir of ALL the believers, had a Jew, Hasday ben Xaprut, as prime minister and the Christian Archbishop of Seville as ambassador. Spain was very prosperous during that time. Unfortunately this acceptance broke down. But we still can learn from it.

In many other countries, people from different cultures and ethnic groups for the most part co-exist quite peacefully, in a way inconceivable a couple of generations ago, when most whites probably would have disapproved of intercultural marriages, so common and uncontroversial today, even among royalties.

Another specific example of activities in this direction is the positive communal relations fostered by the Muslim Jewish Forum in England to bring the two communities together, as it was in traditional communities during old times. For instance, at Stamford Hill, a poor North London suburb, where 20.000 Hassidic Jews and a similar amount of Muslims live, more unites both communities than divides them: Kosher cash-and-carries jostle with halal malls; and sounds of cantors from synagogues

mingle with calls to prayer in mosques. You might even wonder whether the bearded neighbours are Jews or Taliban. Morocco may also be presented as a model of Muslims and Jews living together without hate and confrontation.

Another positive influence preventing clashes between rival ethnic groups could be bringing them together rather than separate them. When country folk move to towns they become more economically interdependent: they learn more cosmopolitan habits, growing accustomed to living with people from other groups.

Living together, trying to form join projects and being useful to others, are very difficult things to do. but they have to be tried, if we really want to avoid conflicts and achieve peace.

Religious Dialogues

Peace might be even more difficult to achieve if we do not take religion into account. The whole secret of all religions is the close ties with others under the Lord's command of "Love your neighbor as you love yourself". Maybe we do not love the self very much. Religious leaders might play an important role in this achieving understanding through a peaceful dialogue between different cultures. Their key role is not to solve the political, social or economical issues which prevent peace – there are other 'experts' for that –, as much as to improve the adequate spiritual atmosphere upon which those issues may be settled.

I don't resist to add a few data from some Asian countries which show an inadequate spiritual atmosphere to achieve real peace: "When Asians convert to Christ it requires enormous courage. Converts typically are ostracized by family and neighbours – and often targeted for persecution. Chinese communists have demolished more than 1.500 houses of worship – most of them Christian – whose members refused to accept direction from the state. In officially secular India, scores of Christians have been murdered and their churches trashed since the rise of militant Hindu groups. On Christmas Eve, churches in nine Indonesian cities were bombed, killing at least 18 believers and wounding about 100 more. An additional 90 Christians were murdered for refusing to convert to Islam, and some 600 more are still being forcibly detained on the island of Kasiui". And, most recently, the self called Islamic State which started spilling the blood of fellow Muslims and local minorities but nowadays targets on infidels, beheading Westerners and Japanese, wherever they are found, without sparing Muslims, as the burning of a Jordan pilot, Muslim like them.

Unfortunately, this is not something exclusive of that geographical area or of any specific time. We find similar incidents anywhere, like Boko Haram, which loosely translates as "western education is forbidden", jihadists show in Africa slaughtering thousands of people. And today's news inform that the Somali terrorist group Al Shabab, one of the most violent

franchises of Al Qaeda, burst into a university in eastern Kenya and killed nearly 150 Christian students in the worst terrorist attack since the 1998 bombing of the United States Embassy here, laying bare the nation's continuing vulnerability after years of battling Islamist extremism.¹⁵

Media and the Web

Nowadays, 'ordinary people' like us control the media *via* the electronic world of the web, the 'new digital democracy'. So familiar already to the younger generations – bloggers, podcasters, 'dotcomers' –, Internet allows chatting with people all around the world to find out how we can help one another to heal the wounds produced by the lack of peace and understanding between different cultures. Consequently it can also been utilized for this initiative.

And last, but not least, the mass media also has an important role in this task: how news is presented, and which words are chosen – specially the adjectives, influence positively or negatively people's attitudes. Biased terms like 'revenge', 'vengeance', 'enemy', and similar, should be refrained. For example, the very same American retaliation after the September 11 events was presented in the U.S. as a response to terror, in Europe as a war on Afghanistan and Iraq, and in some Islamic countries it turned into a war against Islam. Consequently media could be either a main culprit in the developing of an eventual clash of civilizations or one of the main tools for a dialogue between them.

Inner Peace

A mere exterior peace is not enough. In order to influence positively our surroundings, each of us must learn to develop inner peace. Even if until now we have not had time for peace, the time has come to take on the commitment to heal our society, the world and ourselves.

PERSEVERANCE

I am aware that these ideas may be easier said than done, It is very simple to talk or to write presenting ideas about how to prevent violence or achieve peace (intellectuals need to be kept honest, tolerant, and solidarian towards humankind), but it is difficult to implement them (we academicians are not purer than other people). Patience needs to become a habit so that we can deal with our life in a better and more pleasant way. There is much goodwill; but there is also a lot of greed, selfishness, ignorance, and racial, religious and linguistic prejudice. The fight is far from over but, in the words of the Prince of Orange Willem de Zwijger, also widely known as William the Silent or William the Taciturn, "it is not necessary to hope in order to undertake, nor to succeed in order to persevere".¹ At the beginning of the

¹Cited by André L. Mechelync, summarising the concerns of the Pugwash movement. Ploughshare. 2001; 13: 1.

21st century, in spite of what we are experiencing in this very moment, peace among people is not a far distant utopia anymore.

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