
THE WORLD CAN'T BE SO EASILY DIVIDED

Amartya Sen

When people talk about clashing civilizations, as so many politicians and academics do now, they can sometimes miss the central issue. Categorizing the people of the world by “civilization” is crude and inconsistent and ignores other ways of seeing people, linked to politics, language, literature, class, occupation or other affiliations.

To talk about “the Islamic world” or “the Western world” is to adopt an impoverished vision of humanity as unalterably divided. In fact, civilizations are hard to partition in this way, given the diversities within each society as well as the linkages among different countries and cultures. For example, describing India as a “Hindu civilization” misses the fact that India has more Muslims than any other country except Indonesia.

It is futile to try to understand Indian art, literature, music, food or politics without seeing the extensive interactions across barriers of religious communities. These include Hindus and Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Parsis, Christians (who have been in India since at least the fourth century, well before England’s conversion to Christianity), Jews (present since the fall of Jerusalem), and even atheists and agnostics.

Speaking of India as a Hindu civilization may be comforting to the Hindu fundamentalist, but it is an odd reading of India.

Similar coarseness can be seen in the other categories invoked, like “the Islamic World.” Consider Akbar and Aurangzeb, two Muslim emperors of the Mogul dynasty in India. Aurangzeb tried hard to convert Hindus into Muslims and instituted various policies in that direction, of which taxing non-Muslims was only one example.

In contrast, Akbar revelled in his multiethnic court and pluralist laws, and issued official proclamations insisting that no one “should be interfered with on account of religion” and that “anyone is to be allowed to go over to a religion that pleases him.”

If a homogeneous view of Islam were to be taken, then only one of these emperors could count as a true Muslim. The Islamic fundamentalist would have no time for Akbar, Prime Minister Tony Blair of Britain, given his insistence that tolerance is a defining characteristic of Islam, would have to consider ex-communicating

Aurangzeb. I expect both Akbar and Aurangzeb would protest, and so would I.

A similar crudity is present in the characterization of what is called “Western civilization.” Tolerance and individual freedom have certainly been present in European history. But there is no dearth of diversity here, either.

When Akbar was making his pronouncements on religious tolerance in Agra, in 1590s, the Inquisitions were still going on; in 1600, Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for heresy, in Campo dei Fiori in Rome.

Dividing the world into discrete civilizations is not just crude. It propels us into the absurd belief that this partitioning is natural and necessary and must overwhelm all other ways of identifying people.

That imperious view goes not only against the sentiment that “we human beings are all much the same,” but also against the more plausible understanding that we are diversely different. For example, Bangladesh’s split from Pakistan was not connected with religion, but with language and politics.

Each of us has many features in our self-conception. Our religion, important as it may be, cannot be an all-engulfing identity. Even a shared poverty can be a source of solidarity across the borders.

The main hope of harmony lies not in any imagined uniformity, but in the plurality of our identities, which cut across each other and work against sharp divisions into impenetrable civilizational camps.

Political leaders who section off humanity into various “worlds” stand to make the world more flammable – even when their intentions are very different. They also end up, in the case of civilizations defined by religion, lending authority to religious leaders seen as spokesmen for their “worlds.” In the process, other voices are muffled and other concerns silenced.

The robbing of our plural identities not only reduces us; it impoverishes the world. ■

Amartya Sen, master of Trinity College, Cambridge, won the Nobel Memorial Prize for economics in 1998.