

Reflections from **experience** on **cultural** diversity and commonality

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A silent and invisible power is present when people from different backgrounds and belief systems gather in an environment of mutual respect while searching for what they have in common. Differences among peoples –and of course among scholars– are a matter of fact, but none of them should weaken the universal conviction of the need for and the value of “*unrestricted pursuit of objective truth and the free exchange of ideas and knowledge*”. In modern and contemporary society this assertion could be easily labelled as intellectual fundamentalism. Few would suspect that such an admission and statement would emanate from opening Article of the UNESCO Constitution, adopted in London on November 16, 1945. As an international law in vigour, this instrument should not be ignored or misinterpreted. Rather, it is crucial to read it often, to keep it in mind, and to consider it while constructing public policies and making ethical decisions. It should also serve as an important point of reference in our university endeavours.

Hence, neither contemporary relativism nor individualistic subjectivism satisfactorily accomplishes the duty of furthering universal respect for justice as indicated in Article 1 of the UNESCO Constitutional text. In the field of bioethics, “...the importance of cultural diversity and pluralism should be given due regard. However, such considerations are not to be invoked to infringe upon human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms.” (UNESCO Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights, adopted by acclamation on October 19, 2005)

In other words, cultural diversity and pluralism are not ultimate considerations when discerning about ethics and justice. Respect for diversity and pluralism does not take precedence over the principles that must serve as the starting blocks, namely the recognition, protection, and guaranteeing of everyone’s human rights.

The more knowledge we assimilate, the more difficult it is to communicate, share and persuade others of our ideas, convictions and beliefs, especially when confrontation is judged as the only way to reach unity and peace. Creating a simulation of uniformity can wrongly be considered necessary to govern peoples; in a misguided concern for harmony in a globalized and multicultural world, disdain for the act of dissent can emerge.

To learn from peoples from other cultures, intellectual integrity and a firm desire of being open are required. I’m convinced that meeting scholars and diverse thought leaders illuminate our perception and knowledge of humankind.

It’s easier to remain in the comfort zone of our field of knowledge and not be challenged in our intellectual, moral and religious convictions. But this is neither intellectually truthful nor ethically sound. The UNESCO Constitution declares: “...that the wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfil in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern”. This is not only a political responsibility to be considered by nations and States, but also personal

duty we all should undertake as a moral commitment.

Differences could be considered as a deterrent to working together in a spirit of respect. Diversity creates fear everywhere. Our ignorance about what different countries and cultures think and believe often build up walls of suspicion and mistrust. Different beliefs, different ideas, different philosophies, different languages, different colours: too many differences for some people's thoughts and fears to handle.

But a different and more promising way of thinking is possible. Building intellectual and moral bridges is a moral imperative nowadays. It demands a personal and communitarian effort to overcome ignorance of neighbours near and far, since "...ignorance of each other's ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of mankind, of that suspicion and mistrust between the peoples of the world through which their differences have all too often broken into war." (Constitution of UNESCO, Preamble 2)

A spirit of mutual understanding and friendly dialogue is not only possible, moreover it is a moral demand that would help to build unity where unity is most needed for the sake of justice and ethics.

Some people could think that religious convictions are an obstacle to scientific and technological progress, and therefore believers—though intellectually competent—should be considered under a lesser light since they could stop or delay new discoveries or therapies due to moral reflections and convictions they bring into consideration. From this unfair assumption emerges fear and a subtle discrimination that should be avoided. Our diverse and globalized world needs to assume the risk of engaging with each other through sincere intellectual efforts. Virtue can spur us on to overcome what divides us to our detriment.

In the field of bioethics, the endeavour of gathering thought leaders that proceed from diverse cultural and religious traditions could seem a vain effort, perhaps useless. Is it possible to find convergence not only at the level of principles but also when we suggest establishing valid guidelines in a globalized world in which opposing views appear almost impossible to reconcile?

The possibility of meeting scholars and experts from different religious backgrounds became reality in an exciting experience in 2009 in Jerusalem. In a spirit of mutual respect and friendship, the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics and Human Rights held its first major academic experience. That encounter helped me a lot to understand how necessary and important it is to get to know one another better. The core of our mission in the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics and Human Rights consists in creating a forum of diverse bioethics leaders, delivering a common framework to guide the application of bioethical principles, and informing and influencing ethical, legal and public opinions, decisions and actions relative to medicine, life sciences, and human rights and responsibilities.

For me, the International Conference was an event I consider unforgettable and unbelievable (though I consider myself a believer, wink). Some of the visible outcomes of this Conference are the conclusions we offer below. Other beautiful experiences are invisible—like all spiritual goods—but not for that reason less real and intense. Among them, I give thanks to God for the opportunity of forming new Jewish and Muslim friendships in a Holy Land that needs and deserves a better future.

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