

Opposing view: culture, nationality and religion

I HAVE HAD SOME NIGHTS OF GOOD sleep and am ready to argue against the case presented earlier in this column (Culture, nationality and religion, *Daily Times*, July 4, 2004). I fear my worthy opponent has taken a very superficial perspective on the trade-off between these attributes and economic gain making the classic error of mistaking form for content.

In thinking through my argument, a very old and remarkable song came to mind. (Now that I look at it anew I am amazed how it anticipated globalisation almost a half-century before globalisation became a household word.)

*Mera joota hai Japani
Ye patloon hai Inglistani
Sir pe laal topi Roosi
Phir bhi dil hai Hindustani*

And that's the point — when all is said and done, the heart remains as Hindustani (or Pakistani) as it was on the day one was born.

Culture is never so static that one can talk in terms of giving it up. It is constantly and imperceptibly evolving, adapting and changing in response to myriads of internal and external influences. How much does the culture of England today have in common with the culture of the Victorian era? Not all the changes can be attributed to the desire for economic gain. Science, education, suffrage, conquest, immigration — many things have gone into the transformation. And yet, a certain Englishness remains that distinguishes the English from the French or the Italians or the Germans.

VIEW



ANJUM ALTAf

It is ironical that having contested my opponent's arguments I cannot help but share his conclusions. People do make too much of culture, nationality and religion. These are attributes we acquire by accident of birth

On the other side, there are numerous examples of cultural resistance even at the cost of economic gains. The Sikhs fought tenaciously to retain their turbans in England some decades ago, filing and winning costly job-discrimination suits. And Muslim men are fighting the ban on headscarves in Europe with just as much fervour willing to sacrifice better education opportunities for

the sake of retaining what they claim is a symbol of their identity.

As for nationality, one needs to look beyond the colour of the passport at how individuals interpret the exchange. It does not say anywhere that loyalty or patriotism requires one to live forever where one was born. After all, people migrate within a country (from village to town, from one city to another) all the time without their loyalties being questioned. So what's wrong with migration across national borders? And if a piece of paper makes life easier in the new location, why reject that?

What is more relevant is that at heart people believe (granted they may be deluding themselves) they remain what they always were. And not just the emigrants! Why else were Japanese-Americans interred in California during the Second World War? And is that not the reason why after 9/11 if you look Asian you are Asian no matter what the colour of the passport you carry? A change of passports, at the time of the switch, has virtually no impact on how people feel about themselves or their relationship to their places of birth.

As a matter of fact, migrants often turn more conservative than the people they leave behind, clinging to traditions and recreating their old world in the new environment. They are the major supporters of preserving the values they feel are being lost in their places of origin.

In the case of religion, mass conversions are events that take place once in many centuries. Most of the time there is hardly any change over the life of any one individual.

The fact (sad, to some) is that one is what one learns at the knee of one's mother, right or wrong. If mother told me that sect A, sub-sect B was the best in the world, chances are that is what I would end my life believing. That is no doubt the reason why every page of the public school curriculum is being contested so fiercely.

The reported response to the Zakat deduction on bank accounts, if true, only points to a tit-for-tat maneuver to get around what many thought was a cynical, arbitrary and stupid tax. I would bet that not a single actual conversion ever took place. A similar motivation, to cash in on a foolish offer, would govern any response to the hypothetical proposal of the Canadian government (citizenship for change of religion). The faith one subscribes to remains a matter of one's private conscience independent of revealed behaviour. Even so, I doubt if there would be many takers for such an offer.

Be that as it may, it is ironical that having contested my opponent's arguments I cannot help but share his conclusions. People do make too much of culture, nationality and religion. These are attributes we acquire by accident of birth. We can choose to be happy at our good fortune but these are not things one can be proud of. One can only be proud of things that one achieves through one's own efforts or learning or ingenuity.

Like stuffing an editor into a hummingbird...

This is the second in a series of three articles. The first appeared on July 4, 2004). Email: anjumaltaf@hotmail.com