[More about the value of multiculturalism](https://nation.com.pk/03-Oct-2019/more-about-the-value-of-multiculturalism)

Atle Hetland October 03, 2019

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Today, I will write more about the value of multiculturalism in our time and the future. In my article last week, I stressed the value of multiculturalism, and that it would be good for Pakistan to receive more foreigners for far. It is important to take part in cultural exchange; it is important that people from many cultures and backgrounds learn to live together in harmony. It is important to see that a city or town becomes better with more diversity. But we don’t have to accept all from the majority culture or cultures.

When people come from all over the world and settle in a new land, where religion and culture may be different from one’s own, it is not necessary to become entirely like the people in the new land. As a matter of fact, newcomers should keep some, or a lot, of their values from home, or from other countries, too, if they have lived in different lands. Of course, the majority culture’ or cultures, must be respected, but we don’t therefore have to accept all aspects of it.

I am saying this in particular in relation to the current European situation today where many immigrants have entered the ‘old continent’ in recent decades. But it also applies to other areas, and many are less open to newcomers than Europe.

The debate in Europe has recently focused more on how deep integration should be. Some politicians and opinion leaders suggest that multiculturalism is to light. I still advocate multiculturalism. I find assimilation to be similar to ‘one-party rule’, almost dictatorship, while multiculturalism is a form of ‘multi-partism’, using terms from some decades ago when countries changed from being one-party states to allowing many parties. I lived in East Africa, in Kenya and Tanzania, when they changed, when their political systems became more democratic.

To draw a parallel between cultures and politics can be useful when considering multiculturalism and degree of integration of newcomers, indeed in Europe, the continent that has dominated the world for several hundred years – in culture, religion, politics, social sectors, education and science, and more. Europe has not felt challenged by others, maybe until today. But because of not being challenged or threatened, Europe has developed openness to and tolerance for other values and systems. This liberal way of thinking has also meant that Europe has taken ideas and learnt from others, not wholesale and without debate, but over time and after debate.

In recent decades, some groups in Europe have become more vocal in their opposition to change, well, mostly to some people and some values from non-European cultures. Small groups in European countries seem to believe that religion, indeed Islam, is contrary to European traditions and ways of organizing society. I find such arguments to be a very shallow and populist, and they may often come from Europeans who have little knowledge even about own religion (Christianity). I believe many such protest groups might well have chosen other issues than religion to oppose, because they are generally against immigrants. I find it unfortunate that European political and intellectual leaders have not been able to confront those who are against immigration – and multiculturalism – more clearly. Mainstream Europeans, together with the newcomers, have an urgent job to do in order to explain the positive aspects of immigration and multiculturalism. Immigrants are neither in a position to, or have an interest in, ‘taking over’ their new homelands. Right-wing propagandists sometimes make voters believe that, and in some countries, their parties may get up to fifteen to twenty percent of votes in general elections. Politicians and opinion-builders must make a much stronger effort in explaining the importance of the immigrants’ contributions to their new homelands, and that the way to live is in multiculturalism, not to be entirely assimilated, swallowed and eaten up by the dominant culture or cultures in the new land, but to live side by side. Besides, in most ways, the political systems and values of the European countries, will still be maintained.

In our time, some people live in more than one country in their lifetime. For example, a Gujrati couple from Kharian or Lalamusa may move to Norway, settle in and grow a family there. Their children may have values both from Pakistan and Norway, and most of them would not dream of living elsewhere than in the land their parents migrated to. Yet, they would also like to visit Pakistan and keep up contacts with relatives there. They would also keep in touch with relatives elsewhere, if they have that, such as in UK or Canada, and they marry across these borders.

This type of ‘internationalism’ is quite new, and for Norwegians it would indeed be new – save for the fact that many Norwegians have relatives in USA, to where more than one-third of the population immigrated some 150 years ago. Yet, today I would say that immigrants contribute to a new form of looking outward also through their way of living.

Leaders in a small country like Norway have for long realized that it is important to be open to learning from outside, and to cooperate with people, institutions, and companies abroad. Nowadays, it is advised that Norwegian university students spend at least one of the six semesters for their Bachelor’s degree outside Norway. In some fields, Norway still has too few study places at home, and therefore, a good number of Norwegians are educated abroad, mostly in Europe and North America. It may be interesting to know that in about 1950, two thousand of the then seven thousand Norwegians undertaking university studies had to pursue their studies abroad, especially in engineering, medicine and economics.

When I studied in the 1970s, we were encouraged to take part of our studies in another Scandinavian country; few did so partly because the degree structures were slightly different in the other countries. I took distance educational and residential degree courses at Swedish universities; I have always appreciated the outward-looking and comparative perspectives I gained from that, as well as from research visits and fieldwork further afield, in the UK and Africa. Maybe this is a major reason why I have developed a better understanding of values in other cultures, traditions and ways of organizing things? Later, I have also worked and lived abroad, deepening my respect for other people. I am still ‘very Norwegian’ in many ways – and ‘very foreign’ in many other ways. I believe that is also how many Pakistani-Norwegians are. They, and I, have become multicultural – and we are still ‘en route’ and have a lot to learn.

In a future article, I will try to write about the value of giving more prominence to the diversity of the old, indigenous cultures. It is not only things outside the borders, from far away, that are important. The diversity within a land, what is near, is indeed valuable and need more recognition, not be oppressed by the majority culture or ideas from far away.