CHALLENGES OF MULTICULTURALISM

CO-EXISTENCE*

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My talk today is about an issue of prime importance in contemporary American society, namely, the challenges of multicultural co-existence. Discussions on multiculturalism began around 1980 with the controversy over whether high school and college curricula should continue to emphasize the intellectual traditions of Western civilization, or whether they should adopt a more multicultural approach to literature and history. At this level, multiculturalism was a reaction to the Eurocentric monoculturalism of the American educational system that assumed the universality of Western civilization, and represented this universality by the white Anglo-Saxon experience, and as the only culture worthy of being learned, transmitted, and reproduced. From the beginning, it was a political idea and it continued to become more political as it traveled from academia to the main street and now even to Wall Street. As such, multiculturalism was about culture and power. Who had it, how it was distributed, explained, and legitimized.

Later, the multicultural discussion became more general, and a substitute for general anti-racial policies and tendencies in American society. By now, multicultural views that have emerged in order to deal with the multicultural aspects of our human condition and the struggle for recognition, dignity, and justice have been reduced to another Aism. As another Aism, the term multiculturalism often brings cheers or boos, depending on the audience. While a pleasing concept to those who value uniqueness and distinction, it is a negative term to virtuous and absolutist individuals whose views are regarded as absolute truth worthy of universal abide. Multiculturalism, as Gary Nash put it, means an "emphasis on diversity, an elimination of ethnocentrism and the integration of the histories of both genders and people of all classes and racial or ethnic groups. It involves achieving a positive sense of self and self-worth in a person's own culture while not diminishing or denigrating any other cultural form." (1). It involves tolerance, contact, and sharing with others.

My concern today is not about whether we are a multicultural society or not. It is not about which groups are here or not. You already know that we are a diverse society and we have numerous ethnic groups. The debate is about how we relate to one another, how we distribute resources amongst ourselves, how we get along with one another, and how much respect we accord each other. We are diverse, different, and unique. However, the fact remains that we need to work together as a community.

We need to find ways to reach out to each other and respect each other for what each of us is rather than what we want each other to be.

It is in this cordial spirit that I would like to discuss several challenges of multicultural conditions. The challenges I outline are not exhaustive and do not include every possible concern that might exist today, or emerge tomorrow. They are simply some of the most important ones that I would like to share with you today.

I would also like to mention that I perceive these challenges as a common concern for both multiculturalists as well as their opponents. As a proponent of liberal multiculturalism, I believe that the threat to multicultural agenda comes, though not equally, from both those on the left and the right. It is easy to hear the voices of those who do not wish multiculturalism well. However, it should not be a surprise to us that most of the criticisms leveled against multiculturalism are focused on extremist claims made by some highly vocal and controversial multiculturalists. The divisions among those who truly desire a multicultural world have not helped its cause. A critical approach to both of these traditions is necessary.
Challenges:
(1) Let me begin my laundry list of challenges with economic challenges rather than cultural ones. I contend that most cultural and ethnic conflicts in the United States result from the inequalities in the economic and political status of various groups in this country. While having its own dynamics and autonomous influence, culture is a forum in which we present our cases and give expression to our frustrations and anger. Much of the conflict and controversy is caused by the gap between the "haves" and the "have-nots." No matter how we resolve our cultural dissimilarities and how novel our solution is to the issues that pit us against one another, we will be unable to make progress unless we eliminate the economic inequalities underlying other forms of inequality.

We must stop talking about equality as a halfway measure. Equality should not be a mere ideological claim. It is an American ideal and it should be implemented in all spheres: economic, social, racial, political, and cultural. While we need to have a policy that addresses economic issues and makes them a focal point, we also need a policy that recognizes the cultural differences of various groups.

While we need to have a policy that addresses economic issues and makes them a focal point, we also need a policy that recognizes the cultural differences of various groups. We must not assume that the inequalities of the past have no effect on the status and capabilities of those groups in the present or future times. These inequalities demand special attention, special programs, and special efforts in order to level the playing field.

(2) Next, I would like to address the most controversial issue in the multicultural debate, one that has been very divisive and difficult to resolve. Bilingual education has become a major ballot issue in several states. The opponents of multiculturalism argue that bilingual education confuses the students, reduces their ability to adjust, and diverts scarce educational resources. Such an argument ignores the bulk of research that has consistently shown that multilingualism is accompanied by better educational achievement. Frankly, our problem has not been the lack of a language of exchange. Most children in bilingual programs end up speaking English anyway. Our problem is the lack of a common vocabulary of exchange. We lack concepts that we all understand in equal terms and meaning.

The fact is that any blanket approach to bilingualism is wrong. While multiculturalism as a world view advocates multilingualism and encourages learning as many languages as possible, it should avoid making demands which may be either unrealistic or unnecessary. Our approach to bilingualism should be locally based and contextually sensitive. In areas where there is a large group of immigrants whose children may not be well versed in English, bilingualism is an absolute necessity. However, bilingual education should be limited to the elementary level. As students move up the ladder in the educational system it should be gradually reduced to courses in the humanities and social sciences. The goal of bilingualism at the elementary level should be to help those children who are not prepared for an all-English-language environment to learn their subject matter and continue to develop their home language. At higher levels, the goal should be to enable students to connect their past and future by increasing their linguistic skills, ability for the globalized, diversified, and complex world waiting for them.

In areas where the population is homogeneous, bilingualism may not be necessary. However, even in these situations, foreign languages should be a serious option for our children in school. Multicultural society requires multilingual education and multicultural education requires the ability to communicate in multiple languages and perspectives. This is certainly not an easy challenge to overcome.

(3) Multiculturalism is an attempt to give recognition to different cultures, especially those that have been previously suppressed or ignored. However, such an attempt should not lead to mystification of cultures because that could in turn lead to ethnocentrism, cultural chauvinism, and separatism. Unfortunately, some radical versions of multiculturalism have been posed in a language that is threatening not only to their opponents but also to the multiculturalist movement itself. The idea of multiculturalism is to get everyone to recognize cultural diversity in order to eliminate exclusive identities that have suppressed the voices of minorities, women, and the impoverished. Multiculturalists should be wary of ethnocentrism and an excessive sense of nationalism.

We all want to be unique and this is a reasonable demand. However, we need to be conscious that uniqueness is based on the categorization and division of people into groups. Once we begin to compare and make hierarchies of our unique features,
Continued segregation will deepen poverty, intensify racial conflicts, divide the nation, and destroy our dignity as a democratic nation.

( 4) Some multiculturals have shown a tendency to treat race or ethnicity as if they are synonymous with culture. This is incorrect and will give a wrong impression of what multiculturalism is really about. Culture is the domain of values, norms, language, religion, and ethnicity. Race is a human construct mostly in minds of people who use it as a way of categorizing people. As a concept, it has exhausted its usefulness and lost its scientific validity. Though race is an invalid and outdated concept, racism in our society is alive and well. For that reason, multiculturals should stay away from any attempt to tie race directly to culture. Such efforts ignore cultures that move beyond ethnicity or race. They present a limited view of our society because they leave out many groups searching for a uniqueness to which they are entitled. We should move beyond the official ethno-racial categories that have reduced us to only five groups. These categories do not adequately represent the diversity of this, or any other country.

Given the inequalities of race, class, and gender in this society, we should consider these categories only relevant to our understanding of the difficulties we encounter, and the history of groups and their interactions that have brought us here. The analytical emphasis on race, class, and gender should not be confused with their existential significance. To create a truly multicultural society, we need to reduce the extent to which we categorize ourselves. We need to recognize ethnic identities and cultures, but simultaneously attempt to make them a less salient factor in the way in which we relate to one another. If it was wrong for white-dominated Anglo-Saxon society to discriminate against other ethnic groups on the basis of race and ethnicity, it would be equally wrong for multiculturals to judge everyone in terms of their racial and ethnic origin. We need to reduce the emphasis on racial and ethnic categories, and must instead promote an understanding of our common humanity.

The experiences of New Zealand (Maori people, the Pakeha-British and Dutch, and Pacific Islanders), Switzerland (German, Italian, and French people), and Canada (separate areas- French in Quebec and New Brunswick; The Native American in British Columbia and western provinces) show that multiculturalism can work. Each one of these countries has several ethnic groups with different values, languages, and aspirations. Recognition of these groups and efforts to promote a general understanding of their way of life have resulted in considerable cooperation. All these countries have had their share of ethnic conflicts, and there are still lingering inequities to be dealt with, but each nation can point to progress and an extended period of peace and harmony.

(5) The diversity of groups included in the multiculturalist view of America and the diverse opinions on what it is and what it should be confuse most Americans. There are only a handful of thorny issues in the multicultural debate that are controversial. Most others are
reasonable proposals with which most Americans could and should agree. If so, then why is there so much controversy about the issue and so much antagonism? I do not intend to deal with the reasons for such a reaction here. However, I know that not all these problems are caused by the poisoned atmosphere of the culture war or the conservative enemies of multiculturalism. Part of the problem lies in our language, approach, and ways of communicating with one another.

As groups and individuals dealing with conflicts and controversial issues, we usually attempt to talk about our differences before we discuss our similarities. The problem with this approach is that it consumes most of one's energy in dispute, dissipates much of one's good will and enthusiasm, and may generate hard feelings. We need to begin with our similarities and never lose sight of their importance in our relationship with one another. Thus, we need to start with our similarities and reach a settlement on our differences.

Many multiculturalists have emphasized differences. While this is important in order to counterbalance the categorical mistreatment of minorities on the basis of their ethnic differences, it should not be a means and not the end. We need to go beyond this stand by using differences not as a way of segregating and separating people but rather as a way of appreciating and expanding our sense of community, interdependence, and similarities. We have to recognize that individuals are members of many different communities simultaneously. We should neither ignore each other's roots and history, nor find ourselves bound by them. We have to use our histories and cultures as means of achieving a collective sense of our multiple identities.

We should, as philosopher Richard Rorty has suggested, expand our communities and seek members from those communities whom we consider different from ourselves (3). We need to acknowledge our affiliations with people beyond the boundaries of our own group, ethnicity, religion, culture, and country and recognize our strong interdependence and association with people around the world. We live in a global community and our identities can no longer be fully anchored in "localized traditions." As suggested by Richard J. Fayne, we only might go beyond race and join in voluntary organizations not associated with race, such as sports teams, churches, intellectual communities, and community organizations (4).

(6) One of the tragedies of oppression is that its violence and horrors become so intertwined with its experiences of its victims that they can hardly forget it. Fighting such oppression, victims have no choice but to highlight these negative aspects of their life in order to call attention to their plight, and it causes them to fight those responsible for it. It is true that this emphasis on negativity is necessary in the process of resistance. However, when we move to a more advanced stage where we need to build a post-resistance community, we must move beyond the past and think about the future. In that stage, we need an emphasis on the positive aspects of our struggle rather than the negative ones.

An emphasis on the positive aspects downplays the negative feelings and helps us to move to a new level at which individual identities are valued and cultural sensitivities can be recognized and given the attention they deserve. In America, wrongs have been done to many groups and they need to be corrected. However, today, the emphasis should be on the future rather than the past, the right rather than the wrong. Positive, optimistic, and inclusive outlooks gives hope to our children and nurtures their confidence in the future. Historically, minorities and the poor have been betrayed and deceived by the powerful and the wealthy, most of whom were white. Their rights have been violated and injustices have been done to them. In the past three decades, victims of these injustices have been able to stop these injustices, in some cases, and slow them down in other cases. Up until now they had to put their emphasis on the negativity of their past in order to move it in a positive direction. Now, the time has come to begin speaking more selectively positively. Not that racism and other forms of inequality have been eliminated. They have certainly not. But we have entered a constructive period in which negativity works against us. Our children should know that with hard work, cultural awareness, and political activism, they can make and live in a better world. They should know they have a promising future.

(7) Multiculturalists should begin to put their money where their mouths are. To be a multiculturalist, as by now most of us are, we should begin to pursue policies that not only educate us about different cultures but also help us to put such education into
practice. We need to begin a lifestyle that truly helps us to become more multiculturalist. There are several practical solutions, aside from learning each other's languages and histories, that are extremely crucial for achieving such a goal. One of the most important of these is intermarriage. Marriages between African Americans and Whites have increased by 300 percent since 1970. Intermarriage between whites and Asian Americans has also experienced a large increase. We need to be receptive to these marriages, and promote their acceptance. Another policy we should encourage is adoption. Unfortunately some of the multiculturalists have denounced the adoption of black children by whites. I believe this is a wrong view. We need to encourage not only the adoption of African-American children by European whites but also children of European decent by African-Americans, Hispanic-American children by Asian-Americans, Asian-Americans by Arab-Americans, American-Indians by Iranian-Americans, and so on so forth. That is how we can build bridges between ourselves and begin to destroy the walls of ignorance, racism, and stereotypes.

(8) Finally, let me raise the most difficult challenge we have to deal with in a multicultural society -- the one that we talk about the least, but the one which causes us the most pain and agony. Multiculturalism is about culture as much as about ethnicity. A culture includes values and moral issues. As multiculturalists, we have to respect all ethnic groups. We also have to tolerate their moral uniqueness. But how far can we go tolerating each other's moral values when we might find them difficult to agree with? For instance, can an American accept the practice of polygamy among certain ethnic groups in the United States? Or the practice of some Moslem Americans who give their daughters for marriage prior to the legal age? Or calls for abolishing co-ed dormitories because it may offend someone's religious, cultural, and moral sensitivities? Where do we draw the lines? These questions make multiculturalism much more complicated than it might initially appear. You are already well aware of the divisions that abortion has created in this nation. How should we deal with these moral differences? How can we resolve culturally incompatible moral and social values of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities? How do we get along with each other in the same community?

The first and most important solution is tolerance. That is fine. We can be tolerant of other views and morals but should we be tolerant of behaviors which harm and deny others their humanity? Can we allow some African immigrants to practice female circumcision in the United States? The natural thing is to have those who have come later to accept the values of those who came earlier. Well, then what happens to multiculturalism? Or maybe to assert the authority of the moral system with which we are most familiar. Well, this is not too different from the situation we have now, which is very ethnocentric and in many ways racist. That is what brought about the need for multiculturalism in the first place.

Although I believe we should approach this issue from the perspective of cultural relativism, I do not think that cultural relativism alone can provide satisfactory solution. Certainly we should refrain from negative value judgments about other cultures, particularly prior to having an understanding of them. However, cultural relativism should not be confused with moral relativism. Realistically, the latter might be a solution for some of us but by no means will it satisfy the majority of people in this country. Cultural relativism does not mean that we should approve of any behavior by anyone. As progressive multiculturalists, we cannot ignore the abuse of human rights and push it under the rug of cultural relativism. Yes, cultures have their own ways and these are to be respected. But we cannot remain silent about cultural, political, and economic practices that deny people a chance to live, denigrate their dignity, and handle their bodies and souls. What is the solution then?

I believe we should deal with the issue from three perspectives: sociological, political, and humanist. Sociologically, we have to rely on the notion of community, and mark our sense of right or wrong around the boundaries of our own moral community. Geographically, as has been the case, the notion of homogenous communities is still a reality, even in the most fragmented structures of the modern globalized world. People choose to live with or close to those who share their views, values, life styles, and traditions. These selections reduce friction among people of different values, norms, and life style, even though it may generate class divisions and other forms of conflict.
Politically, we should rely on our democratic tradition to resolve our differences. Laws and rules of each community should be democratically regulated rather than autocratically or paternalistically imposed. People within communities should be able to have a strong voice in the manner in which they would like to organize their lives. However, while micro-communities can regulate the behavior of their own members, they should not violate the norms of the larger community of which they are a part. We are a diverse nation, consisting of different peoples with different cultures. But we all live in a political entity called the United States of America. We are members of a family in which the welfare of each is bound to the welfare of all.

From a humanist standpoint, we live in the age of communication, technological growth, and rational institutions. Our success in anyone of these areas has been based on the development of democratic values and respect for the human rights of the individual within and outside their own communities. Multiculturalism is about these rights, no more no less.

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References


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A CASE FOR RENAMING THE ATLANTIC OCEAN THE AFRICAN OCEAN

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This article explores a proposal as thought provoking as its implementation might seem improbable. However, it is a kernel of thought, worthwhile not only for its iconoclastic insight, but for the awareness its suggestion can potentially ignite in continental and Diaspora Africans, as well as others.

The proposal, as its title states, is a case for the renaming of the Atlantic Ocean the African Ocean. Immediately, several thoughts begin to occur to the reader. What is the big deal? Why African Ocean and not something else? What is wrong with the present name of that ocean-Atlantic Ocean, anyway? Probably no one who begins to read this article~ African or non-African, will initially think the proposal important, necessary or feasible. Many will dismiss it out of hand as trivial. Yet, there is much in the relationship between the naming of the world's continents, oceans, seas, mountains, waterfalls, etc., and the desirability, necessity and feasibility of the renaming of the Atlantic Ocean to the African Ocean.

I propose that the Atlantic Ocean be renamed the African Ocean for a number of good reasons. First, I am of the view that one of Africa's