

Civilization: The Magazine of the Library of Congress

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Common values for a common era:

Even as we cherish our diversity, we need to discover our shared values

By Kofi A. Annan

The name of this magazine makes the invitation to be its guest editor irresistible to me, as Secretary-General of the United Nations, on the eve of the third millennium. You might say that the millennium is simply a date in the calendar of one civilization. Many other calendars are used in different parts of the world. And yet the Christian calendar no longer belongs exclusively to Christians. People of all faiths have taken to using it simply as a matter of convenience. There is so much interaction between people of different faiths and cultures - different civilizations, if you like - that some shared way of reckoning time is a necessity. And so the Christian Era has become the Common Era.

This shared way of measuring time is just one example of a much broader phenomenon, which has become known as globalization. In this day and age, people in different parts of the world are directly affected by each other's actions more than ever before in human history. An automobile may be assembled in one continent from parts manufactured in two or more others. Billions of dollars are moved across the world in seconds by pressing a few keys on a computer terminal. A sporting event or a rock concert can be watched in real time by people thousands of miles away. So, too, can scenes of war and terrible suffering.

Like almost everything else in life, this phenomenon has good and bad aspects. It brings us many opportunities to learn from each other and to benefit from a wider range of choices. But it can also seem threatening. Workers may find their jobs made suddenly obsolete or uneconomic by imported technology or foreign competition. Parents may find their children attracted by products and role models from alien cultures. Sometimes the world even seems to be losing all its spice and variety. Instead of widening our choices, globalization can seem to be forcing us all into the same shallow, consumerist culture - giving us all the same appetites but leaving us more unequal than ever before in our ability to satisfy them.

That feeling accounts for much of the fear and anger we see in today's world. In many places, very destructive forces have been unleashed. We like to call them inhuman, but in reality they are all too human: They are one of the ways our human nature reacts when we feel ourselves threatened. Sometimes the world seems not to be coming together but falling apart. In reality, both are happening at once. This is the great challenge to our generation and to the one that will soon replace us. We have to manage the process of global integration in such a way that everyone can benefit and nobody gets crushed. And

we have to preserve the rich variety of human cultures in such a way that all of them can remain open to external influences and tolerant of internal differences.

That is why I am delighted that the General Assembly of the United Nations has decided to take up Dialogue Among Civilizations as a theme for the first year of the new millennium. As I see it, this conversation must enable people of different faiths and cultures to appreciate both what makes them different and what they have in common. I hope it will help people all over the world understand that, even while cherishing our diversity, we need certain shared values if we are to work together for our common good—perhaps even our survival—as a species.

Those core values are defined in the Charter of the United Nations, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and in other international agreements that have been negotiated over the past half century. These documents are not products of one civilization, imposed on others by superior might. On the contrary, like the Common Era, which gives us the millennium, they provide a shared yardstick for the civilization of which we are all a part. They form the essential framework of our peaceful dialogue and interaction with each other.

I hope this issue of Civilization will be seen as a first step toward the UN's Dialogue Among Civilizations in the year 2001. The individual contributors, to whom I am deeply grateful, are from all over the world and represent widely different cultures and political opinions. They demonstrate that such differences can be expressed in a common language and in a civilized way.

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