

Connection not conflict is the best way forward

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In the introduction to a new book Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen urges governments to focus on commonalities rather than differences.

Terrorism, and fear of terrorism, undermines the security, or sense of security, of many millions of people around the world. The [motives](#) of terrorists and their supporters, both active and silently complicit, are complex, shifting and highly individual. In contrast, the response to terrorism is often crude, ill thought-out and misdirected. Increasingly [religious beliefs](#) are perceived to be at the heart of acts of violence.

In his introduction to *Peace and Democratic Society*, published today, a leading Cambridge and Harvard economist argues that an intensive focus on religion and other over-arching factors – such as poverty or inequality – is dangerously counterproductive. The essay by Indian-born Professor

Amartya Sen, who won the Nobel Prize while working at Cambridge in 1998, offers a profound and topical new perspective on terrorism and current events, focusing both on the multi-layered characteristics of individual people and the bigger picture of world events.

Widely regarded as one of the world's leading economists, and once described as the "Mother Teresa" of his field, Professor Sen urges governments to take a more balanced view of human diversity and to avoid the knee-jerk stereotyping that polarises communities. He believes that initiatives set up to build bridges between different groups as defined in terms of their faith alone, although often commendable in their aims and objectives, can serve to reinforce the very divides they seek to break down.

Rather than focusing on differences, Professor Sen encourages governments to develop social policies that foster real connections. In particular, he makes reference to the arts as a means of exploring identity and meeting the human need for self-expression. He writes: "The diversity of civil society engagements needs support, not supplanting. Bangladesh's success in burying religion-based violence as well as in curbing the hold of religious extremism has been helped greatly by focusing on linguistic identity and the richness of Bengali literature, music and culture, in addition to fostering secular politics, rather than holding inter-religious dialogues."

Professor Sen's thought-provoking essay is the forward to the publication in book form of a report commissioned by the Commonwealth Commission and previously circulated to a specialist audience. The report *Civil Paths to Peace* was undertaken by a panel of multi-cultural experts overseen by Professor Sen. Its publication by Open Book Publishers, a Cambridge-based not-for-profit enterprise dedicated to making academic books free to read online, now makes the research available to the widest possible readership.

Widely credited for the development of a people-based approach to economics that took the discipline in a new direction, Professor Sen examines the ways in which identities play out through complex differences and similarities – and the ways in which these characteristics shape our perceptions of each other. A reductionist approach that defines a person through one prism alone is, he argues, “an excellent way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world”.

To show how people around the world defy characterisation, he demonstrates that “the same person can be, without any contradiction, a South African citizen, of Asian origin, with Indian ancestry, a Christian, a socialist, a woman, a vegetarian, a jazz musician, a doctor, a feminist, a heterosexual and a believer in gay and lesbian rights....”.

Inevitably the way in which we understand world tensions is framed by what we read, watch and hear. Professor Sen warns against unquestioning acceptance of stock phrases such as “clash of civilisations” and “axis of evil”. These emotionally-charged images of inevitable confrontation between people with different beliefs and lifestyles have entered the popular lexicon. They are, he argues, meaningless in real terms since civilisations, rather than being distinct and separate, are and have always been interactive in their dealings with each other.

While he encourages us to think beyond convenient clichés, he does not downplay the terrible consequences of violence, or argue against the use of military force. Nor does he seek to deny the corrosive effect that fear of violence has upon us. Indeed he writes: “Questions of violence and insecurity are omnipresent in the world about us. If peace is in our dreams, then war and violence are constantly in our eyes and ears. The terrible toll of insecurity is recognised across the world.”

He does, however, urge us to look beyond the well-trodden lines of

thought that have focused exclusively on [religion](#), poverty, inequality and deprivation as the root-causes of violence and [conflict](#). Comparing the crime and homicide rates of different cities, he writes that Calcutta, the city of his own birth and one of the poorest cities across the globe, is also the least violent in India – and one of the least violent in the world. The peaceful nature of Calcutta, he suggests, might be linked to the fact that it has “a long history of being a thoroughly mixed city, where neighbourhoods have not had the feature of sharp ethnic separation”.

Turning to history, he points out that the terrible Irish famines of the 1840s did not lead to immediate violent uprising, though they became embedded in Irish memory and added to the Ireland’s determination to separate itself from England. Similarly, the shared Christianity of the British, French and Germans did not prevent them from tearing themselves apart in two world wars.

Finally, Professor Sen urges us not to be dejected in the face of growing fears of terrorism but to redouble our efforts to overcome divisive lines of thinking and to draw on our common humanity, taking inspiration not just from insightful writers but also from “the thoughts of very ordinary people”. He concludes: “What seems to lie far beyond feasibility today may become, through our own efforts, entirely achievable and thoroughly ordinary tomorrow.”

Provided by University of Cambridge

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