

Understanding global culture – and ourselves

Nayef Al-Rodhan, the sponsor of the Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Global Cultural Understanding, explains to the *British Academy Review* why we need to understand the interconnectedness of human cultures and the neuro-philosophical underpinnings of our human interactions



Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan is a neuro-philosopher, neuroscientist and geostrategist. He is an Honorary Fellow of St Antony's College, Oxford, and Senior Fellow and Director of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Programme at the Geneva Center for Security Policy.

You say that, according to neuroscientific evidence, humans are emotional, amoral and egoistic. Can you explain that a bit more?

Basically, we are more emotional than rational. Our moral compass is malleable and, for most of us most of the time, our morality is governed primarily by our perceived emotional self-interest.

Evidence also suggests that emotions are part and parcel of our most rational ideas. This means that, at best, we are amoral beings, and that our circumstances – from parenting, to school, to societal constraints and cultural frameworks – heavily influence where we lie on the Gaussian curve of morality. We must never be complacent about the virtues of human nature, in that the most sensible and moral of us can and may, under certain circumstances, engage in acts that are unthinkable.

You argue for a greater appreciation of the interconnectedness of all human cultures, ultimately constituting one collective human civilisation. Why is it important to understand that?

This was always important and useful for human progress, peace and prosperity. But in our globalised world of instant connectivity and deepening inter-dependence, it is imperative to understand, acknowledge and embrace the historical fact that all cultures have borrowed from each other and that no culture exists *ex nihilo*. This is critical for global peace and security: cultural frameworks are highly emotional enterprises, and reflect self-image and self-worth; and thus any hint of disrespect or denigration will result in a reflexive reaction of defensive postures, which is counterproductive to national and international peace and security.

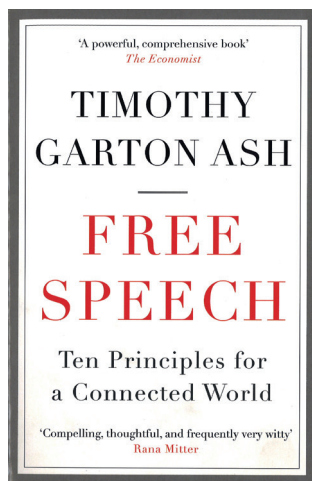
What role does the concept of 'dignity' play in helping us to frame appropriate structures for global understanding and co-operation?

Dignity in my view is far more critical to human nature, sustainable peace and security, and social harmony than



Professor Timothy Garton Ash received the Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Global Cultural Understanding from Dr Nayef Al-Rodhan, at a ceremony held at the British Academy on 30 October 2017. This is the most valuable of the British Academy's prizes, worth £25,000. It was founded by Dr Al-Rodhan in 2013 to honour outstanding work that illustrates the interconnected nature of cultures and civilisations.

just political freedom. You can be free politically, yet have a dignity-deficit and be alienated and disenfranchised, even in mature democracies. What I mean by dignity is much more than the absence of humiliation. It includes nine dignity needs that correspond to those three facets of human nature we mentioned earlier – emotionality, amorality and egoism. These nine dignity needs are: reason, security, human rights, accountability, transparency, justice, opportunity, innovation and inclusiveness.



How can we combat the increased fear of 'the other' which is evident in the politics of so many countries at the moment?

In an article of mine on 'Us versus Them,'¹ I explained the neuro-philosophical underpinnings of divisive politics and the concept of 'the other'. It turns out that our brains

recognise who is different (out-group versus in-group) within 170 milliseconds. This was an evolutionary advantage that helped mankind survive for thousands of years. But in our connected world this can be a problem.

These are the primordial predilections that divisive leaders on the fringes of society employ to divide people for political gains that are self-serving, short-sighted and harmful to the national interest.

The good news is that what happens *after* the 170 milliseconds in which we have recognised someone as different is a *learned* process. This means that the more that respect for diversity can be made inclusive and responsible – through education, the media, popular culture, and politics – the more successful, peaceful and prosperous societies will become.

This year's Nayef Al-Rodhan Prize for Global Cultural Understanding has just been awarded to Professor Timothy Garton Ash for his book *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*. What does this book bring to the debate?

Tim is a great scholar who has written a great book on a critical topic: free speech. I fully agree that free speech is a right that must be defended.

But in my view, there is no such thing as *absolute* free speech that must be defended *at all cost*. It is critical that free speech must be distinguished from hate speech, repellent speech, offensive speech or divisive speech, especially when it comes to emotional issues like race or religion, because these are highly emotional enterprises that are tied to self-worth and one's respectful place in society. In this, I agree with Glen Greenwald's views that there must be limits to offensive and repellent free speech.

I also think that with freedom comes responsibility on the part of the speaker, and that the state should protect social harmony and civil liberties. We should be responsible defenders of free speech, while not being too dogmatic and binary in permitting divisive speech in the name of free speech, regardless of the consequences.

In most cases, it is not too difficult to distinguish between what is responsible free speech and what is irresponsible free speech. The former must be defended, while the latter must be scrutinised. And there will be middle ground that must be reached and tailored to each situation while promoting the public good at all times. ■

1. Nayef Al-Rodhan, 'Us versus Them. How neurophilosophy explains our divided politics', World Economic Forum website (3 October 2016).