

Introduction



The ultimate objective of what we at the Khalili Foundation call ‘cultural philanthropy’ – giving and sharing by way of art, funding, and knowledge – has always been to enhance intercultural understanding worldwide. After all, the eight collections we have assembled and conserved, as well as continued to research, publish, exhibit and digitise over the course of five decades are widely considered to be among the world’s most culturally diverse.

Our vision is for us each to develop a growing appreciation of each other’s heritage and creative expressions. Too many people around the world live in their own cultural bubbles, which leaves them underexposed to the brilliance of different ways of knowing and being around the world. It has always been my belief that cultural diversity is a sterling strength: a force for progress, which should never be a reason for division, prejudice, or fear.

Interfaith dialogue is an important aspect of cultural harmony, and something I’ve been advocating for decades. I always say that we are born as human beings first – religion, culture and context is what we inherit. At an early age I was already acutely aware that despite the distinct differences in the ways we live and view the world, there is far more that unites us as human beings than divides us. It is this vision of cultural harmony that has driven me throughout my life.

This is why my work as UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador has centred around celebrating, at once, both the beauty of our diversity and as well as our common humanity. I believe that it is precisely our differences that makes us all one family. As the late John Hume said in his 1998 Nobel Prize lecture: ‘Difference is of the essence of humanity. Difference is an accident of birth, and it should therefore never be the source of hatred or conflict. The answer to difference is to respect it. Therein lies a most fundamental principle of peace – respect for diversity.’

This book marks the 20th anniversary of the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. We at the Khalili Foundation have seized this historic moment to invite leading scholars, leaders, activists, and artists from a variety of backgrounds to offer their unique perspectives on the social significance of cultural diversity. Together, these perspectives form a rich and comprehensive contribution to one of the most important discussions of our times.

It is a true honour to be able to spearhead such a project which brings together the wisdom, insights and energy of some of humanity's greatest thinkers and practitioners in the area of cultural diversity. Beyond these voices, it is essential that we remember to listen to many more. No one person or nation has a monopoly on truth. It is through the consideration of a variety of perspectives that truth emerges. A harmony cannot be achieved in solo – it requires several voices singing in unison. We hope that the discourse recorded in these pages serves as a model and message for generations to come.

It is impossible to thank all the people that made this book a reality. But for my part, I'd like to thank my family for encouraging me to follow my passion; my colleagues and all the esteemed authors in the volume for bringing the book to life; and UNESCO for its full support for the project.

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