*Issue 10*

*"Most cultures encourage individuals to sacrifice a large part of their own personalities in order*

*to be like other people. Thus, most people are afraid to think or behave differently because*

*they do not want to be excluded."*

The speaker claims that most cultures encourage conformity at the expense of individuality,

and as a result most people conform for fear of being excluded. While I find the second prong

of this dual claim well supported overall by empirical evidence, I take exception with the first

prong; aside from the cultures created by certain oppressive political regimes, no culture need

"encourage" its members to conform to prevailing ways of thought and behavior; in fact, all the

evidence shows that cultures attempt to do just the opposite.

As a threshold matter, it is necessary to distinguish between conformity that an oppressive

ruling state imposes on its own culture and conformity in a free democratic society. In the

former case, people are not only encouraged but actually coerced into suppressing individual

personality; and indeed these people are afraid to think and behave differently--but not for fear

of being excluded but rather for fear of punishment and persecution by the state. The modern

Communist and Fascist regimes are fitting examples. With respect to free democratic societies,

it might be tempting to dismiss the speaker's dual claim out of hand. After all, true democratic

states are predicated on individual freedoms---of choice, speech, expression, religion, and so

forth. Ostensibly, these freedoms serve to promote individuality, even non-conformity, in our

personas, our lifestyles, and our opinions and attitudes.

Yet, one look at any democratic society reveals a high degree of conformity among its

members. Every society has its own bundle of values, customs, and mores which most of its

members share. Admittedly, within any culture springs up various subcultures which try to

distinguish themselves by their own distinct values, customs, and mores. In the U.S., for

instance, African-Americans have developed a distinct dialect, known as Ebonics, and a

distinct body language and attitude which affords them a strong sub-cultural identity of their

own. Yet, the undeniable fact is that humans, given the actual freedom to either conform or not

conform, choose to think and behave in ways similar to most people in their social

group---however we define that group.

Nor is there much empirical evidence of any cultural agenda, either overt or covert, to

encourage conformity in thought and behavior among the members of any culture. To the

contrary, the predominant message in most cultures is that people should cultivate their

individuality. Consider, for example, the enduring and nearly ubiquitous icon of the ragged

individualist, who charts his or her own course, bucks the trend, and achieves notoriety

through individual creativity, imagination, invention, or entrepreneurship. Even our systems of

higher education seem to encourage individualism by promoting and cultivating critical and

independent thought among its students.

Yet, all the support for forging one's one unique persona, career, lifestyle, opinions, and

even belief system, turns out to be hype. In the final analysis, most people choose to conform.

And understandably so; after all, it is human nature to distrust, and even shun, others who are

too different from us. Thus to embrace rugged individualism is to risk becoming an outcast, the

natural consequence of which is to lLmit one's socioeconomic and career opportunities. This

prospect suffices to quell our yearning to be different; thus the speaker is correct that most of

us resign ourselves to conformity for fear of being left behind by our peers. Admittedly, few

cultures are without rugged individualists----the exceptional artists, inventors, explorers, social

reformers, and entrepreneurs who embrace their autonomy of thought and behavior, then test

their limits. And paradoxically, it is the achievements of these notable non-conformists that are

responsible for most cultural evolution and progress. Yet such notables are few and far

between in what is otherwise a world of insecure, even fearful, cultural conformists.

To sum up, the speaker is correct that most people choose to conform rather than behave

and think in ways that run contrary to their culture's norms, and that fear of being exduded lies

at the heart of this choice. Yet, no culture need encourage conformity; most humans recognize

that there is safety of numbers, and as a result freely choose conformity over the risks, and

potential rewards, of non-conformity.