Mother Jones

Cosmopolitanism: How To Be a Citizen of the World

A philosopher issues a call for a pragmatic, humane stance toward difference in a world of strangers.

By Julian Brookes | Thu Feb. 23, 2006 4:00 AM EST

At a time when talk of a "clash of civilizations" looks increasingly like a self-fulfilling prophecy, when bin Laden-ites seek to reshape the world in the image of universal Islam, when our own leaders blithely hive off the good from the evil, us from them, Anthony Appiah issues a call for a more helpful posture toward a world of stubborn difference, an approach he calls, reaching back to the 4th Century Greece, "cosmopolitanism."

The cosmopolitan ethic starts from the thought that human knowledge is fallible—that no culture or individual has a lock on truth—and upholds "conversation," broadly defined as the respectful and candid exchange of views among individuals and cultures—as a good in its own right; agreement is not its ultimate goal. It understands individuals in the context of their cultures but tends, where the two clash, to give primacy to the former. What cosmopolitanism does *not* permit, however, is a kind of flaccid relativism; it insists that there *are* some universals—basic human rights, for instance—which are non-negotiable. Otherwise, it says, difference and disagreement are so much grist for mutually enriching dialogue.

Cosmopolitanism is a title in the "Issues of Our Time" series from W.W. Norton, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr., in which big-name intellectuals tackle important contemporary themes. (The series launched with, in addition to Appiah's, books by Amartya Sen and Alan Dershowitz.)

Kwame Anthony Appiah, who was raised in Ghana and educated in England, is professor of philosophy at Princeton University. His books include *In My Father's House*, *Thinking It Through*, and *The Ethics of Identity*. He's the editor, with Henry Louis Gates Jr., of *Africana*.

Mother Jones: "Cosmopolitan" is a word with a certain pedigree, a certain amount of baggage, so let's

start by defining terms.

Kwame Anthony Appiah: Sure. The word comes from a Greek phrase, which means "citizen of the world." The first person we know to have used the word about himself was Diogenes the Cynic in the 4th Century BC. It was a metaphor then and still is. It's been attacked from both the left and the right. From the right, as you know, it was used as a term of anti-Semitic abuse, and their point was that people who had a sense of responsibility to the human community as a whole were going to be bad nationalists, bad patriots. The other direction of attack, from the left, was that cosmopolitanism was something very elitist. It came to mean a kind of free-floating attitude of the rich person who can afford to travel all over the world tasting a little bit of this culture and that one and not being very responsible about any of it.

I don't think that cosmopolitanism has to be either elitist or unpatriotic; I think it's perfectly possible to combine a sense of real responsibility for other human beings *as* human beings with a deeper sense of commitment to a political community. As far as I'm concerned, the key things in cosmopolitanism are, first, that global concern--the acceptance that we're all responsible for the human community, which is the fundamental idea of morality. What's distinctive about the cosmopolitan attitude is that it comes with a recognition that encounters with other people aren't about making them like us. Cosmopolitans accept and indeed like the fact that people live in different ways; that free human beings will choose to live in different ways and will choose to express themselves in different ways. And that openness to difference comes, I think, from a kind of toleration combined with a recognition of human fallibility. One of the reasons why we're glad there are people out there who aren't like us is that we're pretty certain that there are a lot of things we're wrong about.

MJ: So the goal isn't to have everybody agree.

KAA: Absolutely not. It's not evangelical. You enter a conversation, and conversation is about listening as well as talking; it's about being open to being changed yourself, but it's not about expecting consensus or seeking agreement. You can seek understanding without seeking agreement.

MJ: Sounds like a sort of relativism.

KAA: Well, there's a certain truth to the relativist view, which is that very often when people evaluate other people and other societies they haven't the slightest idea what they're talking about. You can't make a sensible evaluation of, say, the Turkish university regulation about the wearing of headscarves if you haven't the faintest idea of the historical context or the meaning of that practice. Blithely wading in and

saying whatever you want to say about it without that knowledge is just silly, and it's wrong. If you're going to have a productive cross-cultural conversation, or, within a society, a cross-identity conversation, you've got to listen and understand what you're evaluating.

MJ: And not to seek to impose values on others.

KAA: Not at all. The world is full of people trying to make everybody else like themselves. Mormons, Catholics, Wahhabi Muslims. I happen to prefer them in this order: Catholicism, Mormonism, Wahhabism; but that's not important here. What's important is that they share a problem, which is that they're not open, in their standard forms, to the second element that cosmopolitanism depends upon, which is that it's okay for people to be different. Now, just to be clear, there are forms of Islam, for example, that *are* open to that form of cosmopolitanism. I'm not objecting to religion, because I don't think religion has to be universalist.

There are two strands to cosmpolitanism, and both are essential. The first is universalist: it says everybody matters. But they matter *in their specificity*, as who they are, not who you want them to be. The problem is that there are people going around who want to reshape the world, want to reshape everybody else, in their own image. That's dangerous. Some of them are more violent than others; some aren't violent at all. But none of them are cosmopolitan, and in that sense I'm against them.

MJ: But aren't there some things that we *do* want to universalize, right? Like basic human rights.

KAA: Yes, and the challenge is to identify those things. I would say the cosmopolitan view about that has to be that nobody can decide that by himself or herself; we have to engage in a global conversation in order to create instruments, like the human rights instruments of the United Nations, that are the product of a dialogue among nations and across civilizations. Now, we might disagree on what those things we want to universalize. I have no objection, for instance, to the Catholic *claim* to know what the universals are. They're entitled to their claim; what they're not entitled to do is *impose* these things without negotiation.

MJ: But, again, from the cosmopolitan point of view some things are *not* negotiable.

KAA: That's right, because cosmopolitanism starts from the core thought that everybody matters. Each person is entitled, in the context of his or her community, to seek a life of significance and dignity. Well, that sets a boundary on tolerance, because you can't tolerate those who actively prevent people from

doing that. So cosmopolitans have to be hard-line about that; they can't be tolerant of people, say, who think that torture is just fine, or that it doesn't matter what a woman wants—if a male member of her family wants her to marry someone that's the way it's going to be.

You want to converse with anyone who's conversible. So the mere fact that somebody has an illiberal thought or idea isn't a reason for not talking to them. The liberal tradition is one in which even intolerant speech and thought is permitted until it crosses a boundary to intolerant or dangerous acts, or threatens to. At that point you have to take sides. And in many cases it's easy for me to know which side I'm on.

Now, of course there are going to be cases where we differ about whether a boundary is being crossed, but my view is that if you think the boundary is being crossed and you've made a serious effort to understand what the other person is doing then you're entitled to stop the conversation and start trying to get something done.

MJ: Okay, so let's apply this frame to the row over these Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed.

KAA: Well, I think that representing the prophet Mohammed in the way that they did is genuinely insulting, and it's not the sort of thing that a person who cared about cross-cultural communication would do. It's perfectly fine to say that of course people have the right to do this—of course they do—but they shouldn't be surprised if it upsets people. And the corollary is that the upset people have a right to express their upset—again, so long as it doesn't cross that boundary I mentioned.

On the other hand, carefully phrased criticisms of, say, the fact that women aren't allowed to drive in Saudi Arabia, seem to me very much on the agenda. And I don't think we should be troubled by the fact that some people in Saudi Arabia will say, What business is it of yours? A deep part of cosmopolitanism is an engagement with making the world a place in which everybody has, as a baseline, the resources to live a life of dignity and significance. It seems to me perfectly fair to point out that that standard is not met in Saudi Arabia, not only in respect to gender but in respect to lots of things, as of course it isn't fully met in the United States.

If we have a cosmopolitan conversation one of the things that will come out of it is, for instance, how many Europeans find it morally astonishing that the United States tolerate the level of racial inequality that it does, and that our prisons fall way below what anyone in Europe would take to be appropriate human rights minimums. The fact that, in the United States, the attitudes of white people and black

people toward these questions is so different suggests that there isn't an adequate conversation going on. If it's a conversation, that's part of what we should expect to hear, and I would have thought we would be enriched by it as it will make us think about things we need to think about.

MJ: How does the cosmopolitan balance regard for the individual with consideration for the community?

KAA: Well, the deeply liberal view—and this has been the project of much of my recent work—takes the central question of ethics to be the shaping of the social world in order to give each person the chance to make a life of significance to himself or herself. And it takes things like identities and nations as valuable to the extent that they contribute to that, but not as valuable in themselves.

MJ: In light of that, how should we think about identity politics, which put such a high value on membership of a group?

KAA: Well, there are limits to identity politics, of course. Identity can be an instrument of individuality, but when it's invoked to constrain or resist individuality it's usually bad. But you can't responsibly talk about identity politics without taking into account that it arose in response to genuine injustices, and that it was helpful, in the first instance, in response to those injustices, around gender, race, sexual orientation, religion. It's a way of coming together as a way to establish a sense of self-respect. So, there's a good side to it.

Also, when people on the right criticize identity politics they tend to forget that one of the most vigorous and effective forms of identity politics by far is nationalism, and many people on the right are nationalist. Now, I've nothing against nationalism as such; I think there's good nationalism and bad nationalism. But to object to the very idea of caring about identity as a political matter would rule our nationalism.

However, if you're a cosmopolitan you understand that it's important not to be captured by any one identity and not to feel that because you don' t have identity as a basis for communicating with other people that you shouldn't communicate with them. We have lots to share and gain from one another, whether we have exchanges based on shared identity or based on the fact that we have different identities. Another problem is that often identity politics looks like asking for symbolic acknowledgments when what's actually needed is readjustments of power and money. Turns out, it's relatively easy to get a Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, but much harder to abolish racial discrimination in employment.

MJ: You argue in the book that one of the standard criticisms of economic globalization—that it

threatens the survival of "authentic" local culture—is misplaced, precisely because such a view implicitly sets a higher value on the group (the cultural community) than the individual.

KAA: Well, first of all, once you start out on the cosmopolitan exploration, one of the things that's bound to strike you is that among the most interesting civilizations that the planet has produced, hardly any have produced what's interesting about them by themselves. Think of the places we think of historically as great centers of civilization—Mogul India, Venice in the Renaissance, Greece in the 5th Century BC, London in the 19th Century—they all borrow; and this is what people do, they borrow, they exchange, that's how cultures work. Often when people talk about things that are supposedly "authentically" this or that—what could be more authentically Italian than spaghetti, say; except that the Chinese invented it. What could be more authentically American than jazz, which in fact comes out of a city that was black and Irish and Latin and French? You can go on all day. So the first thing to say about the apostles of purity is—what are they *talking* about?

Now, the people who make these arguments are responding to a genuine problem, which is that there are places where people who want to go on with certain practices are prevented from doing so by force. Tibet is a perfect contemporary example. A historical example is the eradication the traditional religions of Latin America by the Spanish. That's terrible. And yet, if everyone in Latin America had consented to become a Catholic, then who would be against it?

The other genuine problem is that there's often a kind of crowding out because the things some people would like to continue with become expensive relative to things from other places. The proportion of people in my home town in Ghana who still wear what we call a cloth, which is a sort of toga, has noticeably declined in my lifetime, and it's because t-shirts and shorts are cheaper. We're not a particularly poor place, so there are people who still wear the cloth, particularly on certain formal occasions, because they can afford it. If they stopped wearing it because they couldn't afford it, that would be very sad, because they wouldn't be able to do what they wanted to do, *not*—again—because the culture was changing. But even then, the solution isn't to force them to wear the cloth no matter what, but to change the world economy so that they *can* afford to wear it.

MJ: Isn't another problem that the global cultural exchange is lopsided—that the rest of the world gets American cultural products, but the US doesn't get much of anyone else's

Well, that's a problem for *us*—that's to say, we miss out. Remember, though, that, if you take the example of movies, while it's true that not many movies from elsewhere gain real traction in the United States, especially if they're not in English, nevertheless more movies from India, or Turkey, or Hong Kong are watched in much of Asia and Africa than are movies from Hollywood. Nigerian films--they call it "Nollywood"—are very big in West Africa. Because of new technology it's much cheaper than it used to be to make and distribute films. So there are lots of exciting things happening in the world that the United States is depriving itself of, and it does so at its own cost.

The cost to *other* people is that because of the great penetration of especially American culture, they have a little bit better sense of what we're like than they do of what we're like. That's a problem for them, because we're busy reshaping the world. And if you're doing that the very least you ought to do is know the contours of what you're reshaping, and we don't. It's also a problem for us, because they notice our lack of interest and they resent it, and that's the kind of attitude that, at the extreme, turns Osama bin Laden into somebody's hero.

MJ: You also argue in the book that when people complain about American-led globalization making the world "homogenous" they're overstating things.

KAA: Yes. The world is full of people consuming things we know nothing about here. And anyway, even if they were (God forbid) force-fed a diet of American television they'd interpret it in their own context. They literally wouldn't see what you see. There are famous studies—I mention two of them in my book—that show this. People tend to borrow the things they find useful and ignore the rest. They interpret and respond; they're not a wax on which you're imprinting an image. People even interpret *plot* in their own cultural context. There are these famous studies of the reception of the American television series *Dallas* in Israel and Palestine. They talk about a moment when a female character leaves her home and goes to stay with an older man. They saw her going back to her father. In fact he's her boyfriend, but in that world that would never be. They saw her doing what they would do in like circumstances. When you send a television series to Ghana or Mexico or South Africa you don't send a guy with it to interpret it; people interpret it for themselves.
