

**SGI PRESIDENT IKEDA'S ESSAY SERIES  
WONDERFUL ENCOUNTERS  
FORMER PRESIDENT SÜLEYMAN DEMIREL  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY**

**A TOWERING EXPERIMENT IN DIALOGUE BETWEEN WESTERN AND  
ISLAMIC CIVILIZATIONS**

Every country offers a different perspective. For example, in Japan an apartment with a western exposure is usually cheaper, because it gets very hot in the afternoon, but in sun-starved northern Europe such an apartment is especially desirable. In some cultures it is rude to look directly into another's eyes, while in others it is rude not to. In Japan it is perfectly acceptable to hold one's rice bowl as one eats, while in Korea this is regarded as impolite. Whereas in some countries it is etiquette to keep a polite distance when talking to someone, in other countries being close enough to feel each other's breath is a sign of friendship and keeping one's distance is a sign of coldness.

Attitudes toward one's country vary as well. There are those who dedicate their lives to their country. There are those who think of the state merely in terms of a large social service provider and who are happy to live in any country that provides such services well.

Instead of passing judgment about these differences, it is important to acknowledge that differences in opinion and outlook exist.

An Indian businessman visiting Japan was taken by his Japanese hosts to a karaoke bar. When they urged him to take the mike and sing, he was shocked and said, "I'm not a performer!" For his part, he simply wished to talk seriously about business, and he was no doubt weary of the insistence in Japanese corporate culture on such demonstrations of camaraderie. He apparently also voiced surprise at the racial discrimination and emphasis on academic standing he found in Japanese society.

As the world continues to grow smaller, understanding of other cultures is an increasingly pressing issue.

Several years ago, in New York, there was a conflict between Korean grocers and Haitian patrons, partly due to cultural differences. When Haitians speak to each other, they frequently reach out and touch the other person's hand or shoulder. They regard such gestures as a sign of warmth. But in most East Asian cultures this is not considered polite. The aversion of the Koreans to personal contact was perceived by the Haitians as a snub and discrimination.

The Korean grocers also prided themselves on arranging their products neatly on their shelves, and they didn't appreciate having customers picking up and handling goods unless they were going to buy them. On the other hand, to Haitians, it is only natural to handle something and look it over carefully before deciding whether it's worth the price. These kinds of cultural misperceptions contributed to the friction between the two communities that eventually escalated into a boycott against Korean-owned grocery stores by the Haitian patrons.

Where strong bonds of friendship exist, cultural differences can lead to new insights and mutual respect. Sadly, in the general run of things, such differences often result in misunderstandings and conflict.

There is nothing worse than forcing one's culture on others.

## **Japan's Rigid Social Conformity**

I have heard an account of a family, here in Japan, in which the father was Muslim. The child of that family attended a Japanese school. Sometimes the school lunch contained pork, the consumption of which is prohibited in Islam. The parents requested that on such days their child be allowed to bring a bag lunch from home, but the school refused, saying that learning to eat what everyone else ate was part of the pupils' education. The child ended up having to skip lunch entirely on those days.

An old saying has it, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Voluntary adherence is one thing, but forced conformity is wrong. Some Japanese, though aware that followers of Islam may not drink liquor, try to impose it on them, saying, "It's Japan, so drink up!" "If you don't drink, I can't trust you!"

There is a proclivity in Japan, fostered by a strong sense of group identity, toward rigid social conformity. Some non-Japanese comment that the most unpleasant thing about living in Japan is the idea that everyone must behave the same way, that what's right for the majority is right for everyone.

It is crucial that we inquire after the other person's views and thoughts. Unfortunately, the arrogance to ignore others' opinions is often hard to recognize in oneself.

We are living in an age of intercultural encounters. What is needed so that those encounters will not be discordant clashes but joyous symphonies?

## **Weathering Fierce Storms Undefeated**

Former President Süleyman Demirel of the Republic of Turkey is affectionately called Baba ("Father") by his fellow citizens. It is a term perfectly suited to this man who exudes a quiet dignity and strength reminiscent of a massive tree that has sunk deep roots in the earth. He has been a prominent figure in Turkish politics for four decades, through the end of his presidency last year. In that time, he has been buffeted by many fierce storms. He has served as prime minister seven times, and twice he was toppled by military coups.

During the second military takeover in 1980, he was placed under arrest. At that time he lamented that it was not he who had been imprisoned, but the Turkish people; it was not he who was in chains, but Turkey's fledgling democracy. The military ordered him to disband his political party and to refrain from any political activity for a decade — and in fact he was constrained in this way for seven years, until a 1987 referendum lifted the political ban.

I met Mr. Demirel five years later, in December 1992, when he was visiting Japan as Turkish prime minister, having been elected for his seventh and final term. He had the commanding presence of one who has weathered the vicissitudes of the times, and the depth and breadth of character of one who has turned all adversities into a source of strength and growth.

## **Crossroads of East and West, North and South**

Our meeting came after the end of the Cold War and the end of the Gulf War. Mr. Demirel remarked that the world was changing, changing dramatically, and that this made efforts for peace all the more imperative. I noted that Turkey, as a pivotal center linking East and West, North and South, has a singular role to play in fostering harmony among humankind.

Turkey straddles Asia and Europe. Six months before our meeting in Tokyo, I was in Istanbul gazing at the Bosphorus Strait. It was my first visit to Turkey in thirty years. The land on the west side of the narrow strait was Europe; that on the east, Asia. Travelers from the West can experience the exotic East, and those from the East can experience the modern West. To both sets of travelers, it is here that the world begins to show a different face.

To the north lie Russia and the Slavic world; to the south, the Mediterranean and Africa. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey forged fresh ties with the five newly independent Turk republics in Central Asia — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan.

Turkey — land of Homer’s birth and Alexander the Great’s early conquests. Greek (Hellenistic) civilization had once flourished there. In the time of the Byzantine Empire, it was a leading center of the Christian world, and later under the Ottoman Turks, it was a center of Islamic civilization. Mirroring its kaleidoscopic history, Turkey today is a place of immense ethnic diversity. One can see people with Arab and Mongolian features, people with faces like those of Greek statues, Russian faces, Eastern European faces. It is as if the land of Turkey is trying to encompass all humanity and make it one, calling out: “West, become East in my embrace! East, become West in my home!”

### ***“Audi Alteram Partem— Hear the Other Side”***

Mr. Demirel is known as a prodigious reader, but when he told me he had read my dialogue with British historian Arnold Toynbee, I was surprised. The Turkish-language edition of the book had only come out when I was in Turkey, about six months earlier.

I remember Dr. Toynbee fondly. Turkey also held a very special place in his heart. It was because of events in Turkey that he was able to become a pioneer in rejecting a Eurocentric view of history. During our conversations in his London apartment, he told me that he was once forced to quit London University because he had “angered people prejudiced against Turks” by reporting on events in Turkey as he witnessed them.

Dr. Toynbee told me that this visit to Turkey had taken place back in 1921, so he must have been about thirty-two years old. He had gone to observe the Greco-Turkish War that had been raging for two years. First he observed from the Greek side, then from the Turkish. For Dr. Toynbee, this was absolutely crucial; he had always made Saint Augustine’s injunction “*Audi alteram partem*” (Hear the other side) his motto.

He placed particular importance on listening to the side that was “the more in danger of not being given a fair hearing.”<sup>1</sup> And he asserted: “If one was to see straight, one must also see things from the mute party’s point of view.... In the present conflict and controversy between Greeks and Turks, the Greeks were the vocal party once again. The Greeks had the ear of the West, and the West was in the ascendant in the world. I was familiar with the Greeks’ case; I felt that it could take care of itself; the Turks’ case was the one that I must take pains to understand.”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Toynbee traveled to a town where Turkish civilians had been massacred. He witnessed the suffering of Turkish refugees, and he realized that these atrocities went completely unreported in the West. He wrote articles on what he had seen as a special correspondent for the Manchester Guardian, a leading British newspaper. The editor of the paper courageously went ahead and published Dr. Toynbee’s reports.

Why was it courageous? For centuries the Turks had been regarded in the West as uncivilized savages. In addition, the memory of the 1915 Armenian Massacre carried out by the Ottoman Turks was still fresh in people’s memories.

After the articles by Dr. Toynbee appeared, a storm of criticism descended on the newspaper, charging it with publishing articles sympathetic to the “unspeakable Turk.”<sup>3</sup> But the paper’s admirable stance of refusing to bend to what Dr. Toynbee saw as a “traditional ‘Christian’ prejudice against Muslims”<sup>4</sup> shines to this day.

The article made a deep impression on the Turks. They were astonished that a young

Englishman had visited a Turkish refugee camp, that he had impartially recorded what he had seen, and that a British newspaper had published it. It was the first time their side of the story had been revealed to the world.

Years later, Dr. Toynbee animatedly recounted how Turkish people gathered around the newspaper, their faces radiant as they read his account.

We cannot gain a true picture of the world from a Western perspective alone, relying solely on information from the West. There is a world seen from Africa, a world seen from the Middle East, from Latin America, from the eyes of various ethnic minorities. International society and Western society are not one and the same.

On his homeward journey by train from Istanbul, Dr. Toynbee began to jot down notes for the outline of what would become his lifework, *A Study of History*. Later, based on those notes, he developed a groundbreaking global historical perspective that he was to bequeath to humankind.

Within a short time of returning to Britain, Dr. Toynbee was forced to resign from his teaching position at London University over what was seen as his support for the Turks. For the next thirty-three years, he made his living writing reports on international issues for the Royal Institute of International Affairs, an independent research organization.

### **“Mr. Rebound”**

President Demirel was born in 1924, the very year that Dr. Toynbee resigned from London University. He herded sheep when he was a boy, helping his parents, who were farmers. He attended junior and senior high school on scholarships. In his first campaign for office, he introduced himself as Demirel the Shepherd. He became prime minister for the first time in 1965 at the youthful age of forty. He was hailed as Turkey’s John F. Kennedy. His long journey has continued from that day.

Modern Turkish history has been, in a certain sense, a towering experiment in dialogue between Western and Islamic civilizations. The Turkish revolution carried out by first president Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) pushed the nation down a road of swift modernization — a modernization that was actually Westernization. To accomplish this, the nation underwent sweeping reforms. Islam was unseated as the state religion, a clear separation of religion and the state was instituted, and education was secularized. The Arabic writing system that had been used thus far was replaced with a new romanized Turkish alphabet. The weekly holiday was switched from Friday to Sunday, and the Islamic calendar retired for the modern Gregorian calendar. The wearing of veils by women or the traditional fez by men was banned. The radical social transformation was not unlike that experienced in the Meiji Restoration in Japan in the late nineteenth century.

Naturally, there was strong opposition to these changes, but President Atatürk was determined to make Turkey part of the West, and he pressed forward relentlessly. Westernization did occur, but social problems such as the gap between rich and poor remained. From the 1970s, an Islamic revival movement arose and grew in strength, fueled by such discontent.

Unsettled by the conflicting demands of Westernization and Islam, of being a nation of Islamic heritage yet a member of the Western bloc, increasing numbers of people sought refuge in tradition. With growing resentment for the West, the trend took shape as an increasingly radical political movement. Forces from the right and the left collided, and ethnic conflict also broke out. Acts of terrorism and destruction surged.

History teaches us that in such situations the power of the military always grows in the

name of restoring social order. And it was as a result of a military takeover that, in 1980, Mr. Demirel was ousted as prime minister and arrested.

In the midst of this turmoil, no matter how many times he was beaten down, the Turkish leader always rebounded to defend freedom and democracy. He was even the target of an assassination attempt.

In 1993, after the death of President Turgut Özal (1927–93), whom I had also met in 1990, Mr. Demirel was chosen as his successor. He has another nickname: “Mr. Rebound.”

### **The “Tyranny of Images”**

Mr. Demirel’s warm smile changed into a serious gaze as he said to me: “Nothing is more important than peace. For peace, we must trust each other and work together. Strengthening our bonds of trust as we cooperate, we must resolve in a friendly fashion any problems that arise.” I agree completely. We need to get to know each other, to become friends. We should not jump to the conclusion that talking will get us nowhere.

The young Dr. Toynbee told himself that it was wrong to stereotype people as the Turks had been, because it dehumanized them; it was important instead to become acquainted with individual Turks. And he put this conviction into practice. He learned Turkish and made friends with Turkish people. He believed that if we personally got to know others, whatever their religion, nationality, or ethnicity, we would realize that they were human beings just like us.<sup>5</sup>

Has the danger of stereotyping people lessened since Dr. Toynbee’s youth? I don’t believe so. In fact, what I call the “tyranny of images”— that is, the propagation of stereotypes and ready-made images — may have even increased.

For example, a certain Japanese journalist had heard the oft-repeated statement that while Scandinavian countries had advanced social welfare policies, many of the elderly were lonely and had a high suicide rate. When he visited Sweden, he offended the local people by asking what park he could visit to photograph lonely old people sitting on benches.

Much of the information that floods our world has been selected and tailored to fit our preconceived notions and stereotypes.

If a journalist wants to emphasize the “examination hell” that students in Japan go through, he can take a photo of students, with headbands tied around their foreheads, sweating over their books late at night in a “cram school.” But this is not a complete picture, for actually many teenagers in Japan are out partying or hanging out on the street with their friends until late even on weeknights.

If, during a military conflict, the aim is to fan public anger, scenes of that country being attacked will be repeatedly televised. In such a situation, scenes of the same country’s counterattacks and the resultant suffering and destruction will rarely be aired.

While the growth and development of the mass media has many positive aspects, it also carries the danger of widely spreading stereotypes and ready-made images. This hazard lies in wait everywhere.

### **Start by Asking Yourself**

It is vital, therefore, to begin by asking yourself some important questions. Are you accepting without challenge the images provided to you? Are you accepting unconfirmed reports without scrutinizing them? Have you allowed yourself to become prejudiced? How much, when all is said and done, do you actually know? Did you confirm it yourself? Have you been to the scene? Have you met people involved? Have you listened to what they have to say? Are you being swayed by malicious rumors? This dialogue with yourself is very important.

Those who at least recognize that they may have all kinds of unconscious prejudices are likely to engage far more amicably in intercultural dialogue than those who are convinced that they have no prejudices. When we stop reflecting on ourselves and asking ourselves questions, we become dogmatic. We become like a one-way street. We don't listen to others and cannot engage in dialogue.

Dialogue for peace starts with a humble and honest dialogue with ourselves.

### **A Bridge Between the Arab World and the West**

When President Demirel was a student at Istanbul Technical University, he told a friend about a dream he had: He wanted to build a bridge across the Bosphorus and link Europe and Asia. Eventually, with cooperation from Japan among others, his dream was fulfilled and two such magnificent bridges have now been built.

Building bridges is important. Without bridges, we cannot connect. Once a bridge is built, others can pass over it.

Shouldn't Japan make an effort to build a bridge of dialogue between the Arab world and the West? Japan has no legacy of antagonism with the Arab world, and it also has close ties to the West. Let Japan take the initiative for the sake of peace and act with resolution. That is surely the best way to carry out the spirit of Japan's war-renouncing Constitution.

### **We Are All Citizens of the Earth**

People are not born as Turks or Americans. They are not born as Palestinians or Jews. These are merely descriptors. Each of us is born as a precious life, as a human being. Our mothers didn't give birth to us thinking, "I'm giving birth to a Japanese" or "I'm giving birth to an Arab." Their only thought was that we be born healthy and alive.

In any country, a rose is a rose, a violet is a violet, though they may be called by different names.

Perhaps the clouds and winds high above the blue waters of the Bosphorus murmur as they gaze down below: "Wake up! From our vantage point, the world is one. You are all citizens of the earth. There is no such thing as Americans, no such thing as Iraqis. There is only this boy, this life, called Bob, who happens to live in America; there is only this boy, this life, Mohammed, who happens to live in Iraq. Both are children of the earth. And yet they are divided by the names of their countries and taught to hate each other! Wake up to this foolishness, this arrogance, this cruelty of carrying hatred and resentment over into the next generation."

What humankind needs now is a global consciousness. We will not find it someplace far away. We will not find it on a computer screen. It lies in our hearts, in our sympathy for the pain and suffering of our fellow human beings. It is the spirit that says: "As long as you are suffering, I am suffering — whoever you are and whatever your suffering may be."

1 Arnold J. Toynbee, *Acquaintances* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 244.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 230.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., pp. 243, 248–49.