

Our diversity has developed into economic asset

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As we celebrate our independence, it is good to reflect on the fact that while we are ethnically and religiously diverse, we do not suffer the economic damage that can result from sectarian strife.

Differences exist. The cemetery where my grandparents rest has two distinct halves. For years, a fence down the middle separated members of one Dutch Reformed denomination from those of another — only marginally different — Dutch Reformed denomination. One needed a doctorate in theology to understand differences between the two groups.

When I go home, I pass a town of 137 people. At the edge of town is a tiny Lutheran cemetery. A half-mile on is another cemetery — also Lutheran. A Peruvian friend once accompanying me was astounded that a small town would need two distinct Lutheran cemeteries. I replied that until he understood the reasons, he would not really understand Minnesota culture.

But while different groups of Lutherans or Calvinists emphasized differences to the point that they wanted separate cemeteries, they did not try to kill each other. And while they might give preference to doing business with people in their church, they would not turn down a transaction with someone from the "other" group if it meant making money.

Our ethos was that otherwise deep theological or linguistic differences stopped at the marketplace. Our grandparents differed on the nature of communion or what the Book of Revelations really meant, but that did not affect the economy.

Unfortunately, such relative harmony is not the rule. Belgium, Ireland, Spain, Bulgaria, Rwanda, Sri Lanka — the list of nations where ethnic, racial, religious or linguistic differences dominate national life is a long one.

Deep divisions inevitably cripple economies. Rivalries dominate politics. Public expenditures are driven by each group getting its "fair share," rather than by true needs. Roads are built in the wrong places and factories sited in the wrong towns. Decisions, made on sectarian rather than economic grounds, act like sand thrown in the economy's gearbox. Output is less than it might be and fewer household needs or wants get met.

Our nation has some divisions and injustices that harm our economy. Chattel enslavement of Africans was an integral part of our nation's founding. It left rents that continue to poison our society and politics.

Black Americans suffer economically because of discrimination. So do recent immigrants. So once did the Chinese and the Irish. Moreover, the bitter fruits of slavery and the Civil War sapped the Southern economy for decades.

Things could be worse. Some historians argue that despite deep distrusts, diversity did not lead to strife because, with the exception of slavery, one group seldom dominated another completely or for long. Whatever the history, the fact that we are made up of people from sharply different groups has been an economic asset rather than a liability.

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