

Michael Scott's **Global Connections**

**“Belief in an interconnected humanity should be measured by the degree to which we take pride in our differences”**

**R**ecently I was greeted by a man who shook my hand in the limpest possible way. I've always preferred to be met with a firm handshake and a straight look in the eye. For me – perhaps rightly, perhaps wrongly – that's what makes a good first impression.

So what did I make of this man? We all like to pigeon-hole – to form an impression that helps us position the person to whom we are talking within a context, or to help us establish some understanding of the relationship between us. I have to admit that, as a result of his (to me) lacklustre greeting, I initially paid less attention to this man than I would have done if his handshake had been firmer.

He noticed that something was awry, and at that point provided the cultural context I had been lacking; he explained that he was from the Philippines. I recalled something I had read long ago – that Filipinos tend to shake hands very loosely because an over-firm handshake can cause offence. I then had to find a way to establish whether that was the case in this current situation, without undiplomatically asking the question directly. (“Did you shake my hand loosely because of your cultural background, or just because that is how you shake hands?”) And so began a fascinating yet tortuous conversation about international greetings, as I tried to find out more about this man's outlook.

We stood there in multicultural London, with people from countless nationalities swirling around us, and talked about the incredible spectrum of ways to say hello – from the Tibetan monk who sticks out his tongue, to the



*kunik* (pressing nose and upper lip against cheek) of Greenland, the Maori *hongi* (touching foreheads) and the Indian hand press and “*namaste*”.

It was a truly refreshing conversation. We hear so much about globalisation repressing individuality, consuming cultures and traditions. And of course that is, to some extent, true – even with greetings. “Hi” will do pretty much anywhere, and even the fist bump that began among motorcycle gangs in the United States in the 1940s is recognised now across the world. But, overall, greetings are still culturally specific. Globalisation has not globalised – at least, in any meaningful way – the way we meet one another. It's still vitally important when visiting any country – for business, especially – to know how to greet people respectfully, to send out the right signals. The world still retains many powerful, important and varied traditions.

This is something we should celebrate. We often talk about the ways in which we are connected. In response to recent moves in the United States and elsewhere to isolate individual nations from

globalisation, migration and terror, politicians, humanitarian organisations and indeed historians have been quick to remind everyone just how much we are, and have always been, connected – and how much we owe to those connections. But in that rush to highlight what has brought us all together (and continues to do so), we should not forget also to celebrate what makes us different. Because, for me, real strength and belief in a globalised and interconnected humanity should be measured by the degree to which we can take pride in our differences as much as our similarities.

How we say hello perhaps seems a fairly simple and unimportant example of difference. But it is the beginning of every meeting, of every interaction. It is where we start from. It is the seed from which every encounter, conversation and friendship grows, even if initial calculations and interpretations are mistaken.

The Filipino man I met knew full well why we were having our conversation about greetings, and called me on it. Embarrassed, I admitted my ignorance and my initial impressions. And from that cultural misunderstanding and that recognition of difference blossomed a healthy and happy respect for one another – a recognition of our differences and a sense of connection. Not bad for a simple handshake. 🌐

**Michael Scott** is an author, broadcaster and associate professor at the University of Warwick. His latest book is *Ancient Worlds: An Epic History of East and West* (Windmill Books, 2016)

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