

Introduction

The shockwaves sent around the globe by violent mass demonstrations in the Muslim World early in 2006 – related to the publication of cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad in a number of European media – had many effects. Most of the immediate reactions by political leaders in Western countries were not much inspiring. They are indicators of a problem, the low level of public knowledge and understanding of realities in predominantly Muslim countries. Most of those reactions re-asserted the high priority of press freedom in the “Western civilization”. They failed to calm down the situation since the real addressees were obviously Western constituencies. There was a real danger of a new bloc confrontation, following the model of the instrumentalization of selected Human Rights as ideological weapons by both sides in the Cold War.

This danger is not yet prevented: New initiatives claiming European ownership for human rights and democracy are mushrooming, new conspiracy theories branding dialogue with “the Islam” as surrender of the “Western Civilization” become popular, public support for Turkey’s membership in the European Union is fading away, and repeated proposals by the Organization of the Islamic Conference, an intergovernmental umbrella of predominantly Muslim countries, resulted in a new “West against the Rest” stalemate confrontation in the United Nations over Islamophobia.

There were thousands of intercultural dialogue events organized in the last 20 years, and their number reached all time highs in the years following the United Nations Year for the Dialogue between Cultures 2001. All this did not provide the international community with a mechanism for preventing confrontations over cultural or religious differences, or for at least coping with critical moments.

Fortunately, the “cartoon shockwaves” motivated a number of actors to re-think the fashionable pattern of dialogue events characterized by “representatives” of large cultural or religious entities seeking the least common denominator, and resulting in mostly very shallow results. The cultural organizations of the Arab League and of the Islamic Conference established expert groups, the United Nations started the Alliance of Civilizations project, the Council of Europe prepares a White Book on Intercultural Dialogue, the European Commission charged an expert group with compiling a report on “Sharing Diversity”, featuring concepts, ideas and practice of intercultural dialogue in all EU member and candidate countries. On 6 November 2007, the decision by the European Parliament and the European Commission to declare 2008 as the “European Year of Intercultural Dialogue” has been amended: The Ministers of Foreign Affairs of

the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership declared 2008 also as the “Euro-Mediterranean Year of Dialogue between Cultures”.

The new keyword is “diversity”, understood no longer as diversity between countries or large linguistic, cultural or religious blocs, but as a dynamic concept for the enjoyment of cultural rights and freedoms of every citizen of this world. The normative fundamentals have been laid out in the “Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity” (UNESCO 2001), followed by a UNESCO Convention on the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (2005).

The rhetoric of a collective “No” to a “Clash of Civilizations” was among the routines of intercultural dialogue events since the publication of Samuel Huntington’s famous article 1993 in “Foreign Affairs”. It seems as it has now given way to better reflected ways of thinking. Edward Saïd was in 2001 among the few who branded Huntington’s scenario as a “gimmick”, obscuring the real problem of a “clash of ignorance”. Today, his warnings against simplistic culturalism have now entered the public discourse. Political leaders and journalists deplore the lack of mutual knowledge and advocate more and better information and education about cultural diversity and religious pluralism.

There is a chance for reconciling two discourses that have cocooned side by side since World War II, the one on human rights, and the other on culture. Debates on human rights have resulted in growing numbers of Declarations and Conventions, supported by complex monitoring mechanisms. Unmistakably, the value of non-discrimination along criteria of gender, race, ethic or social origin, language, religion or any other opinion holds all human rights together. Our discourse on culture, however, was dominated by the desire to define “culture” as a more or less stable collective entity, cultures as something to be counted and classified in the tradition of 19th century cultural anthropology. The enlarged definition of culture, as not only arts and music but also any result from human interaction with nature, including symbolic representations such as language or beliefs, was approved by the UNESCO World Conference on Culture in Mexico City in 1982. This broader understanding of culture opened gates for modern cultural policies, featuring not only “high culture” but culture in everyday life, as a means of democratic participation. But it was still biased towards culture as shaping predictable individual attitudes and behaviour.

It was the Report by the World Commission on Culture and Development, chaired by former UN Secretary-General Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, and published 1996 under the

wonderful title “Our Creative Diversity”, that opened a new perspective at culture, being both heritage and a space for creativity. The annual Human Development Report of the UN Development Programme (UNDP) made it a policy matter to define human development as “a process enlarging people’s choices”. The “Human Development Index” made this understanding more and more popular.

“Dialogue between Cultures” is an expression with a certain bias towards the old understanding of cultures that can be represented in museums or by individual speakers. But cultures do not dialogue. It is always human beings who interact; only in exceptional cases, they have a mandate from a cultural or religious community to speak on their behalf. Personally, I prefer the term “intercultural dialogue”. But it seems that the transition from culturalist thinking to a more democratic understanding of culture takes time. It is therefore important to fill static terms such as “Dialogue between Cultures” or “Alliance between Civilizations” with new contents.

This book presents new dialogue strategies, developed during the last three years, and thematic approaches on gender, religion and learning. It concludes with challenges for Europe, a cultural space embracing diversity but shaped since the European Enlightenment by a notorious lack of self-criticism and by bias towards excessive self-reference. Three years living in the Arab World have changed my perspectives. Intra-European debates on “unity in diversity” are interesting and necessary. But they can derail into an ideology of “Fortress Europe” if they do not fully take into account another factor that shaped European identities: the constant interaction with other cultural spaces in the world, in particular the closest neighbours on the other side of the Mediterranean. This publication includes contributions from colleagues and partners who shared with me adventures in diversity, in search of new avenues for a Dialogue between Cultures.

This book is dedicated to Amin Maalouf, the great master of multi-perspectivity. His work is an eye-opener for understanding identity as what makes every person unique. Most of his novels invite the reader to a fresh look at historical cultural encounters from a number of different perspectives. In “Leo Africanus”, he features the life of Hasan al-Wazzan, a Muslim born in Granada, then driven with his family by the Spanish reconquista to Morocco. Starting there as a merchant, he made the first recorded travel across Africa, became diplomat for the Ottoman Empire, made his pilgrimage to Mecca, and was enslaved and sold to the Pope in Rome where he served as chief advisor and geographer. In “The Crusades through Arab Eyes”, Maalouf presents Southern narratives which are essential ingredients of any new understanding between Europe and the Arab

World. His analysis of “murderous identities” offers not only a lucid analysis of what turns ordinary people from neighbours into enemies; it designs a viable concept of understanding cultural identities as multiple, dynamic and overlapping affiliations and belongings of all human beings.¹ The fatal notion of a singular identity was always a key instrument for mobilizing aggression, hatred and mass murder. It is the first element of cultural heritage that needs to be abandoned in any meaningful dialogue between human beings living between cultures.

Alexandria, in November 2007

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1 Amin Maalouf: “Les identités meurtrières”. Paris: Grasset 1996.
(English: «In the Name of Identity»). New York, London: Penguin Books 2003)