

Postscript

Lessons from Alexandria

In June 2004, I was appointed by the then 35 Member States of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership to set up the Euro-Mediterranean Foundation as a new common institution. “Learning about Cultural Diversity” was identified as its main objective, according to the recommendations by a High Level Group of Experts convened by the former President of the European Commission, Romano Prodi.

Establishing the Foundation in the South was a signal for change. Another one was the proposal by the Egyptian Government to name it after the late Anna Lindh, the Swedish Foreign Minister assassinated on 10 September 2003. Her lifetime commitment to equal partnership between North and South and to multilateral action as a means to overcome unhealthy donor-beneficiary relations became the guiding principle for the Foundation. The challenge was to create new forms of dialogue which would provide learning opportunities for the benefit of all participants.

The first lesson I had to learn was that there is a huge gap between the international consensus on cultural diversity being something positive for humanity, and reality both in intergovernmental and in interpersonal relations. It is not just the usual difference between agreements signed by Governments and real life in their societies. The gap derives from a fundamental misconception of diversity as a dividing line between countries or even continents, or large cultural or religious entities. It seems as if most Governments, when adopting in November 2001 the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity at the UNESCO General Conference in Paris, had perceived the text just as an opportunity to call for peace and dialogue against the scenario of a predicted “clash of civilisations”.

What Governments had agreed upon, is much more: it is a manifesto of cultural self-determination, of the freedom to accept, reject or adapt cultural or religious orientations prevailing in societies. The Declaration recognises “plural, varied and dynamic identities of people (*not peoples, TS*) and groups”. More than ten years ago, the Barcelona Declaration, basic document of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, included a commitment “to ensure respect of cultural diversity and religious pluralism”. It seems to have become victim of a similar misunderstanding.

Citizens with all their overlapping cultural orientations are not yet in focus. Europeans continue to invoke “European values”, and their Arab partners call for values derived from “Arab culture and civilisation”. In the debate on Turkey’s membership in the European Union, we are daily witnessing the extent to which – in Europe – cultural and religious arguments are misused for covering political purposes. There is still a climate of mutual mistrust and bloc-thinking. Intergovernmental tensions are mirrored in ordinary people’s thought and attitudes.

Almost every citizen of Arab countries, irrespective of his or her affiliation to religious or any other belief, feels as victim of discrimination and lack of respect. Most Europeans have difficulties whenever communication reaches this point. Small talk or lessons about democracy and the rule of law are the usual ways out. The situation becomes more uncomfortable when Arab partners open up with expressing bitterness about the world being governed by an American-Zionist conspiracy, and the West having lost its moral and ethical values by allowing pornography and applying double standards. Most citizens in the Arab world share such feelings and believe that Islam is the only major religion which is discriminated in other regions of the world.

Father Paolo Dall’Oglio, spiritual leader of a Muslim-Christian community at the Deir Mar Musa Monastery in the Syrian Desert, taught me a way out of such confrontation. Offering respect instead of requesting it is a key to open hearts and minds. Doing this first step combines the best of Southern traditions of hospitality and Northern traditions of fighting against racism and xenophobia.

In meeting religious leaders, I found a second key which is “modesty of the believer”. No matter what fundamental differences there are between claims of ultimate truth, at the end each human being has limitations in making up and communicating his or her personal beliefs. Merciless people claim possession of absolute truth. The open letter addressed in October 2006 by 38 eminent leaders of Islamic communities all over the world to Pope Benedict XVI was an important contribution to an open dialogue in insisting on the principle that “there is no coercion in religion”.

A third key lesson comes from talking to Ismail Serageldin, the Librarian of Alexandria. He encouraged me to build on the difference between scientific and religious truth. I tried his argument several times, and, hélas, it works. The strongest believer accepts the argument that his or her claim for ultimate truth could only be compromised if it would

be based on scientific evidence. We are acquiring new scientific knowledge every day whereas most claims for religious truth are meant eternal. Even Mohammed Mahathir, former Prime Minister of Malaysia and known for his sharp attitude towards “Western values”, is now defending this argument in calling for a new opening of the Islamic world towards science and technology.

Looking at Europe from the South changes perspectives. Too many European views are spiced with arrogance. The colonial attitude of preaching universal values for the benefit of particular interests has become a dominant feature, poisoning even the best intentions. European visitors to Africa come very soon, in their conversation with their hosts, to the question “please tell me more about your problems”. They give little or no room to talking about other issues such as climate change, ethics of science and technology, or the repercussions of the enlargement of the European Union. I owe this observation to Javier Solana, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Policy who has earned high reputation as crisis manager by his commitment to creating a conversation climate of mutual respect.

Such respect will never result from moral appeals. It can be acquired through a dialogue which is based on the assumption that “the other might be right” and which is designed as a learning opportunity. Already in its initial phase, the Anna Lindh Foundation has developed a number of modalities for such learning. Youth workshops invite young men to perform as young women from another country, and vice versa; teacher-training seminars invite teachers from all Euro-Mediterranean countries to study together the many facets of cultural diversity and modalities of a non-partisan introduction into religious pluralism; young artists enjoy diversity in joint creation; young scientists are invited to take the floor in high-level academic meetings and to make their first experience in joint research without frontiers; young journalists are rewarded for showing their talent in reporting about people with diversified cultural identities living together.

The Anna Lindh Foundation has grown into a network of 37 national networks, bringing together more than 1500 institutions and organisations committed to dialogue between cultures. Cooperation agreements have been concluded with a number of regional and international partners, thus creating multiplier effects and synergies which are essential for a young institution.

I am confident that the second phase of the Anna Lindh Foundation will consolidate and further develop the concept of dialogue as a learning opportunity for all participants and fill the gap between international agreements on cultural diversity and real life of our citizens.

At the end of my term as Founding Director, I left Alexandria with many lessons learnt.