

1. What Went Wrong With the Dialogue Between Cultures?

It happened on 27 March 2006. The President of the Arab Republic of Egypt declared on the occasion of the Khartoum Summit of the League of Arab States: “The Dialogue between Cultures and Civilizations failed the first critical test during the recent cultural crisis.” It is the first time since the so-called Asian values crisis that an important political leader in power declared failure of cultural dialogue. Since the publication of Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations“, there was almost consensus on what should be the public attitude of serious decision-makers. Huntington has to be condemned, how could he even think about a cultural clash, all men and women of good will are in favour of dialogue.



President Hosni Mubarak was right. We were not facing a “cartoon crisis”. We are living in a deep crisis of cultural relations going far beyond a political crisis. The crisis is extremely difficult to overcome, since it is linked to emotions, resentments, feelings of superiority and inferiority. And the crisis has a history in which the satirical cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad, published in September 2005 by the Danish Newspaper Jyllands-Posten, play only a minor, however catalyst role. As the Finnish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Erkki Tuomioja, recalled early in 2006, we are dealing with “accumulated frustrations in the Muslim world” that “have their roots in the many unresolved conflicts affecting Muslims”. At international level, the so-called “War on Terror” is increasingly perceived as “War on Islamic Terrorism” and misinterpreted as “War on Islam”. And within too many Muslim countries, citizens are increasingly frustrated over the slow pace of improvements and reforms they “have the right to expect in terms of democracy, respect for human rights and concrete economic and social development”, according to Tuomioja.

The cartoon-related events were eye-openers. The deep crisis could no longer be denied. Public opinion was alerted, and expectations were high that opportunities for “catharsis”, for cleaning the air from suspicion and resentment, and for change in international cultural relations, would be better used than at previous critical moments.

The Euro-Mediterranean Parliamentary Assembly urged, with a detailed Resolution adopted on 27 March 2006 in Brussels, all political representatives of the 35 Euro-Mediterranean Partnership member countries (the 25 EU Member States and their ten Mediterranean Partners) “to abstain from any action or attitude which might offend religions and/or provoke any hostile acts in respective public opinions”. Taking up an earlier proposal from the eight Arab Mediterranean countries, the Assembly called “on the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation to take action conducive to the establishment of ... an ad-hoc committee, including wise persons and experts from both shores of the Mediterranean, to strengthen mutual knowledge among peoples and inter-cultural dialogue and mediation”.¹

The following reflections were intended to provide this committee with food for thought and initial proposals, developed from the Foundation’s “Draft Strategy for Re-launching the Dialogue between Cultures”², which was presented on 22 February 2006 to the political instrument of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, the Euro-Med Committee.

1 Section 3.4 of this book presents the conclusions of this Committee.

2 Section 2.1 of this book.

Two Lost Decades of Dialogue

The last two decades brought increasing numbers of events for a Dialogue between Cultures and Civilizations but are lost decades. Most efforts were invested in a much too limited dialogue concept which remains within the logic of Huntington's Clash scenario even in contradicting his conclusions. This scenario was never a cause of problems; it is just one example of an almost omnipresent limited understanding of culture as heritage and not also as a space of human creativity and liberty. Definitely, cultural forces shape attitudes and behaviour; but this is only one side of the coin. Such passive view at culture has its roots in 19th century traditions of nation-building. The related concept of "national cultures" reduces the creative dimension of culture to a collective instrument for national cohesion and identity. This goes at the expense of the right to cultural self-determination which is among the core values enshrined in international human rights conventions and agreements.

The human rights, agreed almost 60 years ago as common values of the international community, have not been mainstreamed yet to international cultural relations. The recent cultural crisis witnessed a large number of extremely short-sighted statements of European political leaders such as claiming „freedom of expression“ as “our Western value”. Selective use of human rights as an ideological weapon was a main feature of the Cold War. The consensus achieved at the 1993 UN Conference on Human Rights in Vienna on all human rights forming “an indivisible whole” has hardly entered the everyday political discourse. Moreover, the fact that all provisions of the European Human Rights Convention (1953) became universal human rights recognized by almost all UN Member States with the two 1966 Covenants on Civil and Political as well as on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights seems not to have entered yet the mainstream of European political reasoning. Reference to “European values” is one of the most disastrous tools used in communication between Europe and other regions.

On 14 March 2006 in Cairo, the participants in the 4th annual meeting of the “Arab Press Freedom Watch”, an association formed by journalists associations and unions of all Arab countries, expressed bitterness on most of the European “cartoon crisis statements” claiming freedom of the press as part of the “European values”. This was perceived as disregarding the daily struggle of Arab journalists for their freedom of expression and as isolating Article 19 from the context of all other human rights.

We need to develop a rights-based understanding of culture. We need to reconstruct our understanding of culture, taking advantage of recent international agreements on cultural diversity being as essential for humanity as is biodiversity for nature. We need to repeat 1948: In the aftermath of the atrocities of fascism, genocide and the Second World War, the international community found a common language for common values. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (as much as all subsequent international human rights instruments) does not make a single reference to any particular cultural or religious tradition. We have a common language for universal values. What we do not have, is a common language for cultural differences. We need to work on such language, if dialogue between cultures should make sense and provide instruments for coping with critical moments of confrontation. Preaching unity or the Golden Rule as the core element of global ethics has, too long, been the main result of international dialogue events. Such “lean dialogue” was bound to failure; two decades of dialogue did not produce a mechanism to cope with a crisis. We need a dialogue that starts with the assumption that “the other might be right”, to quote from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s definition given in “Truth and Method”. Such dialogue can provide tools for mutual respect – which is much more than tolerance. In the present crisis, respect is the key word.

The West against the Rest?

The cartoon issue was not the first test of the instruments expected from two decades of dialogue efforts. Largely unnoticed by public opinion in Western countries, a new two thirds against one third divide of the international community emerged in 2004 within United Nations. The last major confrontation of such kind was in the mid-eighties about a New World Information and Communication Order, confronting the principles of state sovereignty and free flow of information at the last possible historical moment before arrival of the Internet. Now it is on religion. It started with good intentions: The joint EU-OIC (Organization of the Islamic Conference) Forum on the political dimensions of “civilization and harmony” in Istanbul on 12-13 February 2002 reconfirmed goodwill and common values. But it could not go further: the follow-up meeting foreseen for 2004 was cancelled.

In April 2004, the OIC acted alone and submitted a Resolution on “combating defamation of religions” to the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva which was voted two thirds against one third of member countries, the “Rest against the West”, as noted by only a few Western media. Although most Western countries had nominated Special Ambassadors and had designated special institutions for “Dialogue with Islam”, they did not accept the proposal by the OIC of including a special mention of “discrimination of Muslims” in this Resolution. The confrontation went further: The same text was introduced to the UN General Assembly and voted on 16 December 2005 by 101 against 53 countries, the yes votes coming from all Arab and Muslim and other so-called non-Western countries, the no votes coming from all EU Member and other so-called Western countries (UN GA Resolution 60/150). At this time, the cartoon issue was at an early stage, it was discussed in Arab and Muslim countries without mass protests or violence, cartoons even printed in Al Fajr and other media in the Arab world, “for discussion”, and for “facilitating forming of opinions”. Many Arab media defended the right or even the need of publishing about sensitive issues in religions. The no votes were explained by Western countries’ unwillingness to accept any wording specifically addressed to Islam; the yes votes insisted on the need to have internationally agreed wording for calming down Muslim populations at large. Western countries tried to contain the crisis through submitting another Resolution under the title “Elimination of all forms of intolerance and of discrimination based on religion and belief” (UN GA Resolution 60/166). This Resolution recalls the UN Declaration of 1981 on the subject. It mentions Islam only once, in recognizing “with deep concern the overall rise in instances of intolerance and violence directed against members of any religious and other communities in various parts of the world, including cases motivated by Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and Christianophobia”. Although this “more balanced text”, as it was qualified by Western countries, was adopted by consensus the same day as the Resolution on defamation, it did not put an end to the confrontation. The new divide over religion is getting deeper and will not vanish even after the waves over the cartoons get lower.

In 2007, the split between “the West and the rest” over the issue of Islamophobia seems to be deeper than before. Both sides seem to have dugged in their heels. Virtually the same texts on “defamation of religion”, with particular focus on Islam, were adopted (24 votes to 14, with 9 abstentions) on 30 March 2007 by the UN Human Rights Council and again presented to the UN General Assembly for discussion (A/HRC/4/L-12). The Organization of the Islamic Conference proposed to include the issue into the Agenda of the forthcoming Second World Conference on Racism (“Durban II”), scheduled for 2009.

As proposed by India, the new Resolution includes a reference to the mandate of Doudou Diène, UN Special Rapporteur “on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance”. His recent report “on the manifestations of defamation of religions and in particular on the serious implications of Islamophobia on the enjoyment of all rights”, delivered on 21 August 2007 (UN document A/HRC/6/6) offers bridges. The Report gives weight to recent expressions of Islamophobia and related discrimination. Diène calls upon Europe: “...the question of the place of Islam lies increasingly at the centre of the construction of the new European identity. In this context the rise of Islamophobia reveals the existence of a European identity crisis.” He concludes with critical remarks on the “ruling elites in a number of Islamic countries (that) invoke religious themes to justify the existence of laws that violate the freedom of conscience and expression, the respect of religious minorities and the rights of women.” He also addresses recent forms of Anti-Semitism and Christianophobia the same way, with indicating responsibilities of all sides. He concludes with an appeal to Member States to start action at national level instead of limiting their commitment to international dialogue events. Very pertinent is also his summoning of “religious and cultural communities” “to explore the internal factors in their beliefs and practices which may have contributed to these forms of defamation of religions”.

As balanced and outspoken the Diène Report is, first comments from Member States are falling short of adopting a comprehensive approach. Most Member States selected those parts for their comments that fit into their previous arguments. Since EU Member States are deeply divided over the “European values” issue, none of them welcomed the pertinent comments on European identities. And, as expected, none of the representatives of Muslim countries commented on the Report’s criticism of ruling elites, misusing religion for justifying human rights violations.

It is obvious that instrumentalization of the cartoon issue for a number of political purposes took place, with a number of well orchestrated mass protests. Denouncing this, however, does not bring about much relief. The crisis is rooted in accumulated frustration which is specific to the Muslim world. In the words of the Egyptian Ambassador Muhammad Shaaban, the objective is to “send a message by the international community to some 1.2 billion Muslims all over the world” who are deeply convinced and feel that Islam was less respected and protected than other religions.³

3 The statement, delivered on behalf of the Arab group, is documented in section 2.3 of this publication.

New Dialogue Strategies

There are a growing number of new strategies emerging. United Nations established a High Level Group on the Spanish-Turkish proposal for an “Alliance of Civilizations” which has, in the light of recent events, a specific feature on Islam. The Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organizations of the Arab League (ALECSO) and of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (ISESCO) have jointly started the elaboration of “principles of a balanced Dialogue” which “should be based on rationalism, scientific methods and self-criticism” (Abu Dhabi Expert Meeting, 4-7 January 2006).⁴ The Council of Europe has recently approved a programme for cooperation with Southern Mediterranean countries and is developing a strategy for “democratic management of diversity”. A “White Book on Intercultural Dialogue” will be presented early in 2008. The European Commission outlined, at the meeting of the EuroMed Committee on 22 February 2006, a “Decalogue” of instruments, regrouping ten Euro-Med regional programmes, projects and networks. The Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures, created in 2005 as the instrument of the Euro-Med Partnership for Dialogue, was invited to present a strategy for re-launching the Dialogue between Cultures the key elements of which are presented in the following sections of this paper. A comprehensive report with the programmatic title “Sharing Diversity” presents the involvement of EU Member and candidate countries in intercultural dialogue activities. This Report will be presented at the beginning of the “European Year for the Dialogue between Cultures 2008”. There was widespread criticism of a Eurocentric attitude which would be expressed by the joint initiative of the European Parliament and of the European Commission do declare such a year as “European”. This led the 9th Euro-Mediterranean Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs (Lisbon, 5-6 November 2007) to also declaring 2008 as Euro-Mediterranean Year of Dialogue between Cultures.

Key arguments

To contain and resolve the present crisis in cultural relations, a number of key arguments need to be communicated among actors already involved or interested in organizing the

⁴ The recommendations of ALECSO and ISESCO experts are documented in section 2.2 of this publication.

dialogue between cultures. The following six arguments are considered particularly important:

1. Traditional modalities of Dialogue between Cultures, developed over the past Decade, have largely failed because of their almost exclusive focus on what cultures and religions have in common. The present crisis calls for dialogue on differences and diversity. This is not a contradiction, since such dialogue can only be meaningful if it is based on the common value of equality and non-discrimination. The Barcelona Declaration (1995) states, as a political objective for State actors, the need to “ensure respect of cultural and religious diversity” in the region; but it has not been addressed so far, according to the recent evaluation of the Barcelona Process (EuroMeSCo, April 2005)⁵.
2. The lack of mutual knowledge about sensitive issues linked to religions and any other belief is obvious. This gap needs to be filled as a matter of urgency. Information on religious pluralism needs to be provided at all levels of formal and non-formal education, in a terminology that is not faith-loaded but accessible to people maintaining diversified beliefs and opinions. This information must include difficult concepts such as what is “sacred”, “holy” or “insulting”. The emotional dimension of religious feelings and any other belief is an indispensable part of such information which should enable citizens to an open discourse on ethical and moral standards, including an unbiased understanding of what are “double standards”.
3. Too often, dialogue events stressed collective identities (national, ethnic, religious) rather than identities of individuals or social groups. Dialogue fora composed of “representatives” of religious or ethnic groups are counter-productive and contribute to the clash of civilizations scenario rather than preventing it. Dialogue between Cultures must create space for mutual perception and appreciation of overlapping, multiple and dynamic cultural identities of every individual and social or cultural group.
4. There is urgent need for strengthening the human rights based dimension of Dialogue: Rather than seeking values common to all religions and cultures, the

5 Barcelona Plus. Towards a Euro-Mediterranean Community of Democratic States. Lisbon: EuroMeSCo 2005

core values of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights need to be stressed. The principle of Non-Discrimination along origin, race, colour, gender, language, and religion or any other belief or opinion has been agreed upon by the international community 60 years ago. In line with recent UN terminology, all cultures must be considered having equal dignity. This principle, however, must not be used as an argument for limiting the obligations linked to universal human rights instruments. In other words: No violation of human rights can be justified by invoking cultural traditions.

5. Active tolerance, involving mutual respect, needs to be promoted rather than mere acceptance of diversity. This requires provision of new and better learning resources and interactive educational methods. Education, in this context, should focus less on teaching and more on the organization of learning processes. “Interactive” methods focus on learning through empathy and role-taking, which supports the acquisition of multi-perspectivity as a core element of education for democratic citizenship.
6. Calls for boycotting a whole people are an alarm signal. They are an indicator of tendencies towards deepening stereotypes, of desires to balance perceived discrimination with discrimination of others, and of perceived double standards with their application to others. The present crisis calls for significantly more mutual interest being expressed: Europeans can contribute to calming the situation in expressing interest in the cultural and religious life within Mediterranean Partner countries, and vice versa. There are common stereotypes existing on both sides, such as: Europeans having lost moral values and ethical standards, Arabs or Muslims being potential supporters of terrorism. They can only be overcome through sincere dialogue about diversity between and within countries.

Towards a common language for cultural differences

There is no doubt that global terrorism and, unfortunately, also some approaches to combat it, are deliberately fuelled with cultural differences. The September 11 shock and its aftermath should, however, not obscure the “multitude of local claims and regional tensions over scarce resources” that, according to the former Secretary-General

of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, had long been masked by the confrontations of the Cold War blocs. They “pushed people into the narrow walls of group identity, feeding a new tide of smaller confrontations between ethnic, religious and national communities”.⁶ It is the everyday “logic of rejection” and the “narcissism of small differences” that, according to Pérez de Cuéllar, “threatens peace and security and violates the inherent dignity of the individual person”. Amin Maalouf, in his analysis of “murderous identities” (“Les identités meurtrières”, 1996) provides us with Mediterranean experience on how neighbours can turn over night into enemies, de-humanizing each other in reducing a human being to one trait of difference. It is always the same mechanism of drawing dividing lines between human beings through assuming and imposing collective identities rather than respecting the human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination. Theodor W. Adorno and Alfred Horkheimer, in their studies on “The Authoritarian Personality”, published shortly after 1945 as a first analysis of the cult of power and violence in Nazi Germany, went deep into psychological terminology of ego- and ethnocentrism. Javier Pérez de Cuéllar and Amin Maalouf come to similar conclusions: Culturally sensitive language needs to avoid schematic concepts such as the popular distinction between “Us” and “Them”. They even warn against further using the term of “The Other” which is standard in almost all intercultural education concepts, since it opens the gate for imposing collective identities on the individual. There is no viable alternative to their proposal of adopting a rights-based approach in dealing with cultural diversity.

But there is an obvious need to reach out to the emotional dimension of cultural expression. Feelings of inferiority or superiority overlap usually with belief. If not addressed, such feelings create resistance to new information; perception is biased by pre-determined value judgements. In order to deconstruct such pre-determination and allowing change and learning, it is helpful to analyze the individual or collective acquisition of such fixed value judgements. Social psychologists identified the phenomenon of coping with “cognitive dissonance” (Leon Festinger). The mechanism is very simple: If you cannot get what you want, you tend to de-value the desired good in order to continue living in peace with yourself and your community. This pattern was already given literature status by La Fontaine in his tale of the fox that was not able to reach to the grapes high up, and left the spot after telling to himself: these grapes are much too sour.

6 President’s Foreword to the Report by the World Commission on Culture and Development. *Our Creative Diversity*. Paris: UNESCO 1996, p.9.

Discussions even between young people from Europe and from Arab countries tend to remain, too often, at the surface of cultural differences. The head scarf issue is a typical example: Europeans qualify easily Muslim girls and women as victims of social pressure. Discussion hardly goes deeper, so as to allow an interpretation of dress codes of Muslims also as expression of feeling morally superior to Westerners. According to widespread feelings in the Arab and Muslim world, Europeans have lost their morals and ethical standards. Feeling at least morally superior is a key element of a survival strategy of those who feel discriminated.

The issue of double standards can and should not be avoided in the endeavour to find a common language for cultural and religious differences. It needs to be addressed in its full scope, ranging from Western Middle East Policy to Muslim calls for boycott against Denmark and to various kinds of imposing identities or values or calling for summary punishment. The double standard issue includes varieties of hypocrisy such as the – typically European – attitude of justifying actions and policies serving own interests with reference to universal values, a European heritage from colonial history.

In a climate of resentment, rumours can kill. Such climate cannot be healed by providing more knowledge alone. If learning about cultural diversity should bring about changes, many historically evolved and, therefore, taken-for granted views at cultures, identities, including their cognitive and emotional characteristics, need to be first de- and later on re-constructed.

Such reconstruction needs to seek a balance between the individual and his or her cultural environment. Individual decisions on accepting and adapting inherited forms of cultural expression need to be recognized as equally important as the generalized, collective dimension of culture.

What we need now is developing a common language for understanding and respecting cultural differences, without doing harm to our universal values. Many elements of such common language have been developed over the past ten years. The following five elements of such common language are of particular importance:

1. Cultural diversity between as well as within countries is as essential for humankind as biodiversity is for nature. Cultural differences are not a threat but a key factor of quality of life.

2. The right to be different is core element of a rights-based understanding of culture. The individual human being, as cultural actor, as learner, as communicator, as bearer of cultural diversity, is at the centre of a better understanding of culture.
3. Overlap between cognitive and emotional elements of intercultural relations is the rule and not the exception. Historical and biographic, individual and collective processes of attaching value judgements to cultural differences need to be addressed.
4. Deconstructing self-referential systems of belief and knowledge is essential. Religious truth that is believed eternal can only be compromised by an attempt to make it more convincing with evidence from scientific truth that is changing every day with more knowledge.
5. Freedom of opinion or any other belief is not only a basic human right; it is intrinsic to any human understanding of religion. Enforcing belief would be a contradiction in itself, as much as imposing values “comes down in the end to negating them” (Jacques Delors).⁷

Much more needs to be done to enable citizens of the increasingly multicultural world of the 21st century to know about, to understand and to respect their differences in cultural and religious expression.

“Learning about cultural diversity” has been recommended as priority for the development of social and human partnership in the Euro-Mediterranean region by a high-level group of experts, convened by former President of the European Commission Romano Prodi, in December 2003 (“Prodi Groupe des sages”). It is the unifying theme of the programme of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures.

Edited version of a keynote to the Forum “Europe in Dialogue and Interaction between Cultures” at the Finnish-Swedish Cultural Centre/Hanaforum, Helsinki, Finland, 5 April 2006

⁷ Learning: The Treasure Within. Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, chaired by Jacques Delors. Paris: UNESCO 1996 (citation from Part I, section 2.3)