

3. What needs to be changed

3.1 Meaningful Dialogue

Marie-Claire Foblets (MCF), Tuomo Melasuo (TM) and Alisa Meyuhas Ginio (AMG) reply to ten key questions resulting from the debate on “what went wrong with the dialogue?”; Interview: Traugott Schoefthaler.

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[Original text in French]*



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What are, in your view, the major misunderstandings or misconceptions between “the Western” and “the Islamic” world?

MCF: The West sees the “Islamic World” as a whole, an entity. There is, however, not only one, but there are several realities, no country is the same as the others, and within each country there are numerous very different orientations – exactly as in the West there are differences between countries and between citizens in their relations to religion. It is wrong to make a general statement concerning “the world view” of the citizens of the Muslim World. Most probably, the “Muslim World” sees also the West as a bloc, but I feel that there exists a more differentiated perspective. The connotations between “Holy War/Jihad” and “Islam/terrorism” are dangerous, and the image transmitted by the media is not very helpful for making the distinction between those totally different concepts.

TM: I do not think that we should talk about misunderstandings or misconceptions. It is not about a “technical” problem caused by error. It is a problem of attitudes. Generalisations and stereotypes about the Muslim World do not have real substance, and even less about “the West”. Instead of adopting stupid generalisations, we should try to approach social realities.

AMG: The so-called “Western world” derives its roots and characteristic traits from the historical and cultural fusion of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the Greco-Roman Classical heritage. The Islamic world has been influenced by both these traditions, yet allows a predominant position to the precepts of the Holy Qur’an. All three monotheistic creeds believe in one, indivisible truth that is not to be compromised, challenged or denied. In the Western world, following a process of secularization and revolutions, many societies, tracing their roots to Latinate Europe and its historical and cultural dependencies, instituted a constitutional separation between State and Church. Such a separation makes social, cultural and political pluralism possible. In most Muslim countries the said separation has not taken place; neither has it occurred in the Jewish tradition and, later, in the State of Israel. The difference regarding human attitude towards life between a religious and devout person on the one hand and a secularized layman on the other hand is crucial. Whereas the secularized individual weighs his or her preferences according to worldly reasoning – what is likely to happen now and here – , the pious, religion-oriented individual makes decisions in relation to Divine Revelation and the life after death. This decisive gap seems to be eternal. The problem is how might cultural pluralism function in a society committed to a single predominant creed and can one successfully compromise between the loyalty to country and people and the devotion to religion and heritage?

What went wrong with the Dialogue between Cultures?

MCF: We should be capable to avoid any form of stubbornness in dialogue. There is a tendency of talking about “the other” instead of establishing a real dialogue with everybody sitting at the same table for an open and respectful discussion. It is important to accept contradictions, listen to other ideas, to speak and to listen.

TM: You have very well indicated that we do not give enough consideration to cultural differences. I would like to add that we do not give enough consideration to the actors, to the individuals in their societies. I am always explaining to my students in Finland that the religiosity of a Mohammed is not so different from that of a Matti.

AMG: The dialogue between cultures must be founded on reciprocity and mutual respect. Where neither exists – there can be no dialogue. Father Paolo Dall'Oglio claims that respect for the other is not enough and should be followed by the parallel concept of hospitality: to be able to welcome others ‘under our tent’ and appreciate their own hospitality. Following the process of colonization first and decolonization later, and in view of dwindling birth rates at home, many European states encouraged immigration from Third World countries in the hope of getting cheap labour. The measures taken in order to promote integration of the new-comers into the hosting society were either non-existent or insufficient or rejected by the new-comers on the grounds of loyalty to their ancestral traditions. The result was frustration on both sides. Today, in view of terrorism, demographical facts and cultural ghettos, the Western world feels threatened and fear-stricken. Fear breeds hate and Western societies tend to nurture hate towards ‘the other’. In Europe, Anti-Semitism has long been professed against Jews; now it is joined by Islamophobia. The existing dialogue between cultures, trying to stress the common issues, such as the belief in one God; the fact that we all are human beings [“If you prick us do we not bleed?” (W. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, III, i)], misses its point: It offers no remedy for fear or hate. The only way to create a true dialogue between cultures is getting to know ‘the other’s culture, being ready to respect it and only then discuss the pending issues of contention or differences between cultures.

What new forms, contents or methods do you suggest for establishing a meaningful dialogue between cultures?

MCF: We should promote real cultural exchanges through arts. It is important to learn more about history, the heritage and cultural exchanges of the past, but also to entrust creative artists the mission of elaborating the full perspective of creation and reflecting on encounters.

TM: Here again, it is not a technical issue which would be subject to innovation. But focussing on actors, individuals, social or ethnic groups, could be a good choice.

AMG: The only feasible way of establishing a meaningful dialogue between cultures is education, pedagogy and encounter. Educating the youngest members of society and encouraging them to learn about their neighbours – ‘the others’. Why have they come here? What are their creeds and beliefs; their distinct ways of life? In the text of the interview of Father Paolo Dall’Oglio (see section 6.1 of this book, TS), there is mention of the core curriculum for all schools in Bosnia and Herzegovina on “the culture of religions”, providing a basic knowledge of all religions in the country to the young generation. I believe this is the only way to create and establish a meaningful dialogue between cultures; intentionally, stress is to be offered to the young generation, since this target audience may still be ready for some change, whereas the more elderly are stereotype-stricken and less eager to modify their ways of thinking. Getting to know ‘the other’ is the first step in a long and poignant way of being able to accept and respect thy neighbour, if not to love him or her. Such an acceptance should be the basis for social integration of the new-comers into the hosting society. Yet ‘the others’ have to contribute their share as well: once a chance of integration is sincerely put before them, they should do their utmost to conform to the code of social behaviour and cultural values prevailing in their hosting countries. I would mention here the maxim launched by Jewish scholars in Germany in the eighteenth century Age of Enlightenment and following the legal and civil emancipation then bestowed upon the Jews: Be a Jew in your tent and a member of civil society while among your fellow citizens. True enough, racism drove this fragile co-existence into a terrible end; yet the initial idea seems just and right to me. Getting to know ‘the other’ on the one hand, and opening the way for a meaningful integration for ‘the other’ and by ‘the other’ on the other hand, may alleviate the fear and hate of one side and frustration of the other.

In the debate of the last Advisory Committee, the following elements have been proposed as essential for a meaningful dialogue: reciprocity, giving way to the other's point of view, reflecting the historical and political context. Do you agree with these proposals? And/or do you wish to suggest other elements?

MCF: Let us not forget culture! Music, literature, plastic arts, theatre, but also culinary culture, the art of living...The Mediterranean is a space where – before religions caused divide – there were established many common features in terms of language, food, cultural habits...

TM: I would like to add hospitality as a prevailing principle of Mediterranean cultures.

AMG: I fully agree that reciprocity, giving way to the other's point of view and reflecting the historical and political context are essential for a meaningful dialogue. Allow me to comment on one of Father Paolo Dall'Oglio's statements with respect to the creation of national entities in the Middle East, under the direct influence of the West. Father Dall'Oglio is quoted as having said that the above mentioned process was executed through a national ideology that is external to the Islamic World. He then goes on to say that: immediately the Zionist nation was created in the heart of the Arab World (Islam and Oriental Christianity). Furthermore: capitalism and communism came to impose their logic and their internal fight upon the Arab Islamic World. I beg to differ: Zionism – the yearning for Zion – is no novelty of European origins in our region. Judaism and the Jews are an essential part of Mediterranean Civilization. The Jews are and have been a Mediterranean, Middle Eastern people and although expelled from their land after several defeats inflicted on them by the Romans, the Jews have never renounced their claim on the promised land nor have given up hope to be “next year in Jerusalem”. Excepting the period following the crusaders' conquest of Jerusalem, when both its Muslim and Jewish populations were exterminated, there have always been Jews living in Jerusalem – Zion and mourning its destruction. The history of my own Jerusalemite Meyuhas family bears witness to this historical fact. True enough, the lack of political power and the deplorable life conditions imposed on the Jewish people in exile, brought about the fact that the number of Jews in the Holy Land was very limited. Yet there were always Jews in Jerusalem. We are not new-comers to this region. We used to be a minority and have fought our way through so as to become the majority in our homeland.

What do we need to master critical situations of misunderstandings (such as the situations linked to the cartoons, or later the statement by the Pope)?

MCF: Offering excuses, and understanding where are the limits between “freedom of expression” and “respecting others”.

TM: I am taking neither the Pope nor the Danish newspaper serious. And I do not believe in misunderstandings in this context. I think that some people in Denmark acted deliberately the way they were doing. The issue with the Pope is not clear to me.

AMG: Primum non nocere is a sound principle not only where medicine is concerned but as a rule for life. Some words or expressions had better not be pronounced. Once a critical misunderstanding is caused, I would expect all the sane and moderate elements of the relevant communities to take conciliatory measures in order to address the situation, aiming at a peaceful solution.

How can we create better understanding of “sensitive issues” where feelings of religious or cultural groups are touched?

MCF: Understanding that the way we speak about others is also the way to speak about ourselves. Respect of others’ religion reflects how we are considering our own religious heritage, even if it is nothing more than cultural.

TM: We need to talk about such issues with more openness. We need to abolish the taboos, while showing respect.

AMG: I see no better way for understanding “sensitive issues” where feelings of religious or cultural groups are touched, than learning to know ‘the other’: namely the religious convictions cherished by ‘the other’ and the ways of life upheld by them.

It has been stated that “the Arabs are fed up with Dialogue”. If you agree fully or to a certain extent: what is your explanation?

MCF: There is lack of respect of the “sacred”.

TM: I do not agree. According to the “message of Amman” (2004), the dialogue with the other cultures and religions is among the Qur’anic principles. How should the Arabs, including the Christian Arabs, not agree with the need for dialogue?

AMG: I can see the frustration of some Muslims not being accepted by the “Western world” as equals; the more so considering the crucial contribution of Muslim civilization to the world in general. On the other hand, some members of Muslim groups tend to proclaim the moral decadence of Western society and its ways of life. The same principle of mutual study and getting to know ‘the other’ applies here: the more Muslim schoolchildren learn about the Western world, the more they may be willing to accept it as it is. The more such schoolchildren are taught to respect gender equality, the more understanding they may become regarding Western ways of life.

What should we do against Islamophobia in Europe?

MCF: Islam is one of the religions practised in Europe, many Europeans are Muslims. The connotation of Islam and “non-European” is unacceptable.

TM: We need to explain more often that all Abrahamic religions have the same roots, and, therefore, are in reality the same thing.

AMG: Islamophobia is one form of Xenophobia. Unfortunately we have to admit that xenophobia is a common trait of the human race; it is common especially where minorities are concerned. Again, I repeat the need for education, for getting to know ‘the other’. The outcome may not be love for all human beings, but it may lessen tension, fear and hatred.

Father Paolo states: "Western culture, although very plural in its expressions, is in fact very ideological seen from outside."
Do you wish to comment?

MCF: Let us give the floor to everybody! Then we will listen to other points of view. Do the new migrants have their freedom of speech as citizens? Do the citizens whose parents or earlier generations were migrants assume their responsibilities in accepting and defending their history, their heritage, and sharing this with others – the new migrants and the "indigenous"?

TM: I could not agree more. Western culture is already ideological from inside. Even the concept of a "West" is very ideological; it does not at all reflect reality. We need to use more scientific terms, which means: more precise wording.

AMG: I am afraid that I have not grasped the full meaning of Father Paolo Dall'Oglio's statement. What is the meaning of "very ideological seen from outside"? I certainly do agree that Western culture is very plural in its expressions.

If you look at the new Programme 2007-2009 of the Anna Lindh Foundation: which are the three priorities you consider the most important?

MCF: Culture, culture, culture!

TM: Reinforcing the national networks; mobility of the various actors; more weight to contemporary popular cultures.

AMG: I consider the need to strengthen the Human Rights based dimension of Dialogue as a crucial element underlying the relationship among human beings. Father Paolo Dall'Oglio states that the UN organization depends on the culture of the Western countries that won the Second World War. Even so, the numerous Muslim countries, that have become members of the UN, did so out of their free accord, pursuing their own interests and therefore have to accept that equal dignity of all cultures is granted, provided that Human Rights are respected. Dialoguing needs to take into account differences and diversity and be based both on mutual respect and scholarly study of 'the other'. Last but not least: the study of history is crucial for a better understanding of the human race.