

### 3.3 Inclusion within Diversity and Citizenship Rights in a Common Euro-Mediterranean Agenda

Gema Martín Muñoz



*Prof. Dr. Gema Martín Muñoz is Director-General of the Casa Árabe, International Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, Madrid and Cordoba. She presented this text to the EuroMeSCo 2006 Annual Conference “Paths to Democracy and Inclusion within Diversity” on 4 to 5 October 2006 in Istanbul and as her contribution to the strategy debate within the Anna Lindh Foundation where she is member of the Advisory Committee.* Photo: EFE

It is frequently argued that it is necessary to promote a “dialogue between cultures.” But cultures do not “talk,” individuals do. This often repeated “dialogue between cultures” phrase is not just a mistaken formula that has blossomed because it sounds attractive; it has survived because it evokes a specific kind of relationship between the Western universe and Islam. It is an ideologically charged view, revealing of the degree to which – consciously or unconsciously – we have recreated a relationship that counter-poses “us” against “them.” We have internalized a reductionist and monolithic image of “us” and of “them” (the two “cultures”) as if these were closed and unconnected universes in which millions of human beings who are either “Western” or “Muslims” represent totally uniform alien and even antagonistic cultures. A hierarchical notion of superiority and inferiority emerges from this radically binary vision. That is why, in the best case scenario, the call is for “tolerance,” a term loaded with insulting paternalism.

This concept of “cultures” in relations between the Muslim World and “us” is a product of a Western construct in which Islam and the more than one thousand two hundred million individuals within are fictitiously represented, labelled ideologically as a dominant global force, in a way that portrays the behaviour and the culture of that enormous mass of people as a uniform entity. They are all One, and the great variety of ways of

life, states, histories and cultures extending across an immense geographical area across Africa and Asia (as well as the millions of Muslims that are born and live in Western countries) is ignored. This is a consequence of the central role played by conflicts in the Middle East, and of the interest of some local and international actors in demonizing Islam as a whole, which is presented as a Single Islam that represents All Muslims and which is dominated by fanaticism, fundamentalism, exacerbated hatred and irrationality. In other words, instead of relating with real cultures and religions, we think that we have to deal with pathological phenomena called “Islam” and “Muslims.” The hostility and reductionism that feeds this reconstructed vision of a threatening, backward and violent *homo islamicus* turns Muslims into people requiring therapeutic and punitive interventions. Ultimately, as denounced by the Palestinian thinker Edward W. Said, they become “murder-able.”<sup>1</sup> Thus is the imperial and colonial path re-forged.

The concept of decadence is also abused in the way that Western society thinks about the supposedly monolithic culture of Muslim peoples. It is assumed, in the total absence of real knowledge, proof or argument, that these peoples are experiencing a prolonged process of decadence that anchors them to the past and distances them from the global march of progress. Without denying the unfulfilled needs that exist in the Arab and Muslim world as a result of economic underdevelopment and a clan-based monopoly on power – factors that affect many parts of the world – there has been a process of historical evolution with achievements, modernizing transformations and a creativity contributing to philosophy, culture, intellectual progress and art. The problem is that we are not aware of this progress because of a powerful resistance to integrating the Arab and Muslim cultural sphere into the World mosaic. To give just one example, the “phenomenon of decadence” is part of the essentialising and deterministic package that describes “them” that we have recreated and only to affirm a logic of inferiority-superiority vis-à-vis our culture, which is imposed as a universal model.

It is not difficult to imagine the anguish that an Arab or Muslim feels when faced with the implacable insistence on portraying his or her faith, culture, and identity as inherent sources of decadence, terrorism, violence and fundamentalism. The imagined culturalist clash that arises from these representations dilutes and obscures the provocations of the West, and is the *real* cause of exacerbation of relations between both worlds.

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1 *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts determine how we see the Rest of the World.* New York, Vintage, 1997.

There is a widespread feeling of frustration in the Arab and Muslim World, or in the words of the Lebanese writer Samir Kassir, a profound feeling of *doom*.<sup>2</sup> Such feelings are not simply the product of the experience of underdevelopment (which I would not want to minimise), but also of the historical experience of impotence and dispossession.

In fact, the end of colonialism did not come with the end of European imperialism in the Greater Middle East. On the contrary, these lands and their peoples have continued to suffer from the power strategies that their geographical situation encourages the perpetuation of. Foreign domination apparently ended after the Second World War but it actually continued and so the populations of the region remain as unprotected from its threats as much as they were at the end of the First World War when Europeans carved up the world between them. The occupation of their lands and all the deaths that it entailed, and the experience of humiliation and domination have thus remained facts of life for over a century.

The particular context in which that frustration has taken root must also be taken into account. Arab and Muslim populations are mostly urban, and a large new generation of young people has had massive access to education. Thus, these are societies in which a large part of the population is highly politicized. In addition, there is a very strong collective memory of belonging to a certain part of the world (the cradle of great civilizations, with a key geo-political position, and an immense reserve of global hydrocarbon resources), that should mean influence and wellbeing. However, these benefits have remained outside their control for more than a century. These are sociological and psychological factors that aggravate the feeling of being dispossessed.

The complete lack of political efficacy (of the international community and local governments) to apply international law (UN resolutions, humanitarian and human rights conventions) in this part of the world also contributes to accentuate the culture of despair. To this should be added the universe of perceptions and the gaze of the Other: there is a sentiment that one is “impotent to be what one thinks one should be, to affirm the will to be in the face of an Other that denies one that possibility, that scorns and dominates one. The impotence to silence the feeling that one is no more than disposable & even though the game is being played on one’s territory.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Considérations sur le malheur arabe*. Paris, Sindbad, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Samir Kassir, *op. cit.* p. 16.

The complicated alchemy of all these feelings strengthens the culture of victim-hood among Muslims (why do they hate us?) and increases the risk of their withdrawing into themselves in their rancour and frustration. To counter this, deep reflection and action in the Muslim world is necessary to escape this pernicious closed circle of the “us” and “them.” Every time Muslim religion or culture is “insulted” in the Western world, the counter reaction cannot remain simply virulent and emotional (and often manipulated or consented to because as long as rage is directed against the West it is not being directed against the absence of the rule of law or democracy at home). Muslim scholars and intellectuals must respond serenely, rationally and scientifically (qualities that are entirely absent from Western provocations) to such essentialist and culturalist views of the Muslim World. The way forward is mobilisation through reason and science, with empirical arguments and observations, and through the creation of an intelligent lobby that can shape Western thinking. This is a challenge that Muslim intellectuals and thinkers have been unable to take on thus far. It is also crucial that the whole “cultural” issue should be addressed in terms of the need for respect for human dignity and the historical, cultural and religious legacy of each human being.

If history in the Muslim World does not progress in such a way as to allow citizens to control their own destinies; or if western knowledge of the diversity and creativity of that World does not grow, the well intentioned “dialogue” will become just another failure to add to others that litter relations between the West and the Muslim World.