

5. Learning about Cultural Diversity

5.1 Cultural Diversity for All

How can you even think of “celebrating diversity” while the horrors of war in the Middle East affect millions of innocent people? I fully share this question that was addressed to me from many partners in 35 countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region at the peak of the Israeli-Lebanese War in July and August 2006.

Dialogue at Times of War

There is one lesson that needs to be learned from emergency assistance: Giving food, clothing and shelter to victims is only a first step. Already in emergency situations, we need to prepare food for thought and rebuild an environment conducive for human creativity. Otherwise, we would assume responsibility for dehumanising victims of war and violence to mere beneficiaries of emergency assistance.

“Learning about cultural diversity” is a guiding principle for conflict prevention. It helps also finding orientation for educational action in conflict situations. During the recent war in Lebanon, the Anna Lindh Foundation had identified a number of new projects together with its national networks in Lebanon and Palestine, and also with new ideas from Israel and Jordan. One of the programmes was funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA), with the objective to promote reading and development of public libraries in the Southern Mediterranean region, from Morocco to Syria. The programme on “children’s literature” started in Lebanon with reading and other cultural activities for children in refugee camps and other makeshift settlements. Such envi-

ronments, characterized by poverty, tristesse and despair, easily provide fertile ground for chain reactions of aggression, hatred and violence. Assistance to schools, teacher training, even a film festival and invitations to young graduates to join Euro-Mediterranean groups of young researchers from different countries help keeping brains, emotions, hope and spirits alive as human tools for shaping more decent social and cultural relations in the affected communities.

For many years now, dialogue in the region is already severely constrained by the failure of numerous attempts to revitalize the Middle East Peace Process, and the recent armed conflicts in Gaza. It can only be hoped that the Governments concerned do whatever they can in order to stop conflict, violence and war and the suffering of innocent people on all sides.

In addition to political efforts, we need men and women of good will to stop the hatred which always fuels new violence. Even during the Second World War and during the most dangerous times of the East-West conflict, such people raised their voice – intellectuals, young people and concerned citizens at all levels. They turned to be the vital element in reconstructing post-war societies.

Wars are the extreme form of political and economic conflicts. The more these conflicts are obscured by cultural and religious differences and claims, the more difficult are solutions to find. If we want to help political settlement, we need to dry out the cultural and religious fuel of such conflicts. We need to find new and more effective forms of a dialogue which starts with the assumption that the other might be right.

What we witnessed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in Europe, was that neighbours who lived for generations together, with little or invisible social and cultural differences of their lifestyles and their language, turned over night into bitter enemies. Christian Catholic Croats, Christian-Orthodox Serbs, and Muslim “Bosniaks” were told by some leaders to consider “the others” as enemies who deserve to be killed, raped, and pushed away. It is such misuse of normally only small cultural or religious differences that fuels conflicts and violence all over the world. But let us name it what it is: it is a misuse of culture or religion for masking economic or political purposes and making people believe that they would serve, when hating or killing “others” the “higher” goal of serving their community and values. It is definitely not a cultural conflict.

If there is a conflict situation, fuelled with cultural or religious differences, too often people choose the easiest way out: Listening to a speech, or telling each other, that they all share universal values. This does not help at all, it leads to the repetition of shallow conclusions, and the situation remains unchanged.

We definitely cannot eliminate causes of economic or political conflicts by cultural action. But we can unmask such conflicts, in analysing the real causes, claims for land, resources, or domination or freedom. And, equally important, we can learn more about cultural or religious diversity and pluralism. Without sufficient knowledge, there can not be respect.

Dialogue as a learning opportunity

Any real dialogue is an opportunity for learning. Religion is one important dimension of human culture and civilization, based on beliefs and tradition. There are too many human beings pretending that they would know exactly what God's (in Arabic, Maltese and some other languages: Allah's) will is. We as human beings need to be more modest: All of us have opinions and beliefs, inherited and inspired by traditions from our fathers and mothers and earlier generations. Human beings are subject to errors, including in their beliefs and religious practices. Nobody can claim that God justifies any conflict or violence on religious reasons. Such conflicts must be attributed to weakness of human beings. But how can we expect followers of different religions to respect each other's opinion and belief, if they do not even know about their differences?

A very good idea was practiced recently in Denmark: As part of an "Islam-Expo", organized by the Danish Centre for Culture and Development (DCCD), all Muslim *and* non-Muslim citizens of Copenhagen were invited to participate in a Friday Prayer in a Mosque, and to have a face-to-face talk on all matters of interest with a Muslim neighbour. We need more such creative ideas. As much as we need people who speak more than one language, we need people who know more than one religion. And we need to give young people an opportunity to discover cultural diversity as an element that makes our life richer and that is as essential for the survival of humankind as is biodiversity

for nature. We need to give citizens a perspective for a 21st century where political and economic conflicts are settled by those we are electing to represent us.

The – partly violent – mass protests of January and February 2006 in Arab and other mostly Islamic countries against the publication of “Muhammad cartoons” in some European newspapers have unleashed a new wave of alienation between North and South. European Muslims in particular get to feel this. The majority of the citizens of the European Union, who were in favour of Turkey’s entry until recently, has disappeared; and economic considerations are no longer in focus. According to recent polls (Allensbach, May 2006), “the Germans lost the readiness to maintain a tolerant attitude towards Islam; they feel threatened and consider Islam intolerant.” Hitherto minority views swell into majority opinions: 56% of the Germans now are against building of new mosques and believe that “a clash of civilizations between Christianity and Islam” is in process.

A surge of cultural and religious resentment threatens all efforts for building confidence and cooperation in economic and political North-South relations. In a society poisoned by prejudice and resentment, rumours can kill. There was a rumour that French police had chased to death two young immigrants in a Paris suburb. It was the beginning of excessive violence for weeks in November and December 2005. There was a rumour that in a Coptic church in Alexandria a film ridiculizing Islam was shown. It was followed by fierce clashes, the first violent confrontations between young Muslims and Christians in the largest city of the Mediterranean with seven million citizens, which are still flickering up time and again. Twelve people died.

Europeans discovered that they were wrong in assuming to know their Southern neighbours well. What can education do to help coping with the current crisis? Traditional concepts are not sufficient and might even do harm. For instance, there is hardly any educational resource material on the cartoon issue which would not draw attention to the fact that there is no picture prohibition in the Qur’an and that it is “only” a matter of tradition. What can we expect non-Muslim youth – or even their parents – will be doing with this piece of information? I am afraid that not only Germans will show off at their next visit to Turkey or Egypt and teach lessons to their Muslim hosts.

Escaping the narrow mind of culturalism

We do not just need more knowledge. We need a fundamentally new understanding of culture and cultural identities. Most of the debate about Huntington's "clash of civilizations" scenario was superficial in offering a moralizing choice between clash and dialogue, without challenging Huntington's basic assumptions. There can be no doubt that cultural and religious traditions are shaping people. But the heritage dimension of cultural identities is only one side of the coin. Culture is also creativity. There is an active relationship between each individual with the cultural environment in which he or she was born. Rejection, adaptation and assimilation are options that everyone is entitled to have, according to the principles of human rights agreed upon by the international community. Our understanding of culture needs to be reconstructed on the fundamentals of human rights. The non-discrimination rules which are intrinsic to all human rights instruments support positive values such as the right to cultural self-determination, freedom of belief or any other opinion.

The superficiality of the Huntington debate is no coincidence. Two decades with thousands of international fora for cultural dialogue did not produce an instrument to cope with critical situations. We have oversimplified the matter. Once and again, such fora featured speakers and other participants as Christians (usually with confessional diversification), as Jews, as Moslems, or as Buddhists, or as Europeans (German, Polish, or French...), as Arabs (from the South or from migrant populations), as Africans or as Asians. People were invited to represent a collective entity, usually without being authorized by anybody to do so. The "representative" format of cultural dialogue remains within the logic of the Huntington scenario. This is why such dialogue usually does not go further than invoking common values.

What we are missing is a vivid cultural dialogue to address the issue of cultural and religious differences instead of leaving them behind in quickly passing on to common values. It is, however, essential not to limit our understanding of such differences to the predominant perspective of differences between nations, ethnic or religious groups or other entities. Human rights based understanding of culture sets higher stakes: cultural dialogue has to give room for the expression of each participant's way of dealing with his or her cultural environment, including religion.

I was impressed by a young Egyptian woman professor of sociology, who participated in an inter-religious dialogue meeting at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. Speaking after many male representatives of churches and religions, she was asked to take the floor “as a Muslim”. She replied: “Although I am a member of the Umma, nobody authorized me to speak on behalf of Islam. I am speaking for myself.”

So we need to encourage more people to follow her example. And we need to create dialogue situations between people who develop interest in expressing themselves freely, explain their ways of thought and their own cultural preferences, their ways of dealing with traditions they were born into, all the variety of their belongings. Keen interest in other people and their own mixture of orientations and “identities” is a key factor. Since, however, such tradition of free expression and interest in others are usually not transmitted to citizens in our societies, we need to create dialogues as challenges for learning.

All different, all equal

Differences, however, should not artificially be opposed to commonalities, as it happens in too many intercultural debates. We are “all different, all equal”, this is the extremely important key message of the Council of Europe’s ongoing youth campaign. One of the most interesting proposals for new forms of youth workshops came from a number of young people participating in the Anna Lindh Foundation’s “Dialogue 21” Internet-based campaign in 2006. They proposed, as a specific subject, training in how to cope with group pressure. Culturalism is – in the last resort – a mindset for de-humanizing the individual person through imposing collective identities on it. Huntington’s scenario is not an exception. Culturalism embraces many facets, from the well-intended “representative” dialogue between cultures and religions, the national bias in history teaching, the media hype of national sports heroes or Nobel Prize winners, down to group pressure in intercultural youth encounters.

We need to change our parameters of “culture” if we want to educate democratic citizens for the 21st century. As much as democracy is based on pluralism of opinions and opportunities for expressing them, education for the 21st century must be guided

by the principle of multiple perspectives, overlapping cultural belongings and religious affiliations or preferences, by a strong commitment to escape the detrimental logic of reducing cultural identities to just one element – which then would make up collective identities.

Such education must also have its place in educational and cultural action with victims of conflicts, who deserve to be given a perspective for a different life upon settlement of the conflict. One of my Palestinian colleagues impressed me with his comment on young Israelis and Palestinians “living next door, side by side, but in totally different worlds”. “How can we expect them to live together in peace one day, if we do not start now giving them an opportunity to learn how to live together?”, he concluded.

New forms of cultural dialogue focus on the concept of cultural diversity which is not simply a new term for grasping the colours of culture or for portraying national, ethnic and religious differences. Every human being is bearer of cultural diversity in his or her configuration of cultural identities.

The “Universal Declaration of Cultural Diversity”, adopted by the General Conference of UNESCO in November 2001, is the first international normative instrument to acknowledge multiple and overlapping cultural identities of individuals and social groups. To quote from article 2: “In our increasingly diverse societies, it is essential to ensure harmonious interaction among people and groups with plural, varied and dynamic cultural identities as well as their willingness to live together. Policies for the inclusion and participation of all citizens are guarantees of social cohesion, the vitality of civil society and peace. Thus defined, cultural pluralism gives policy expression to the reality of cultural diversity.”

Dialogue between cultures is essentially a dialogue between human beings, not between anonymous cultural entities. We need, therefore, to provide present and future generations with the tools necessary for dialogue. In the Euro-Mediterranean region, all citizens should have the opportunity to learn at least one, preferably more foreign languages and to acquire knowledge about all religious and cultural traditions that shaped this region as crossroads of civilizations.

The Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf made an interesting suggestion in his pamphlet “In the Name of Identity” (2000; French original title: *Les identités meurtrières*, 1996). Our Governments, he argues, spend tremendous resources on recording

the distinctive biological characteristics of their citizens, but they do not recognize their distinctive cultural identities, made up from a unique mixture of cultural orientations and belongings of every person. Maalouf suggests a “cultural ID card”. In one of our workshops this suggestion was creatively taken up: all participants received an empty box and a block of white paper. They appreciated the invitation to put down on paper their preferences in music, literature, food and beverage, sports, politics, their vision of partnership and understanding and moral and other values. The result was more exciting than most dialogue fora: All participants understood that every human being is a bearer of cultural diversity.

An important tool for intercultural learning is cooperation across frontiers. But such cooperation cannot be established by moral appeals, it must be based on shared interests. Two examples, tested in dialogue projects across the Mediterranean: When inviting teachers from different countries to learn together how they could teach on cultural diversity and religious pluralism, it is highly recommended to get them by a shared problem, for example the lack of school textbooks providing the needed learning resources for cultural diversity. So they are interested to learn from and with each other. Another example are groups of young researchers from different countries, invited to do a joint piece of research together. They know that experience in international teamwork is on high demand nowadays with future employers. And, at the end, they can be proud of their joint product. Learning and working together across frontiers is a key element for building mutual trust and confidence.

With the first Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio, we learned that preserving biodiversity is essential for the survival of our planet. For cultural diversity, a similar change of mentality still lies ahead. We need to transform fears of differences into positive attitudes towards diversity and pluralism. This can start with discussion of “globalization” that did not bring about cultural uniformity. This can also start with discussing gender relations. What a relief can be brought by an open debate on statistics about differences between men and women: If “60 per cent of women prefer group solidarity, whereas the majority of men prefers a more competing attitude” – to quote just one out of the myriads of similar findings – what about the others? What led 40 per cent of women and the “minority” of men preferring other options? The challenge can go on with Europeans and Arabs, believers and more secular people, and so many other categories of collective identities. Learning can be so interesting, once the learner starts with adventures in diversity.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 provides us with a common language for universal values. It does not make a single reference to any particular cultural or religious tradition. To cope with critical situations, we need a common language for cultural diversity, for understanding and respecting cultural differences. It is extremely important that such differences are understood in their complexity of all people “all different, all equal”. Discovering diversity starts with a boy and a girl coming from the same village and supporting the same soccer team. They might find more things they have in common. But it remains an educational challenge to provide them with skills for respecting their freedom to choose different gender roles, different political opinions, or different ways of practising their religion.

Adapted from contributions of the author to the World University Service Germany North-South Education Newsletter Nr. 52, June 2006, to the Journal Lifelong Learning in Europe, autumn 2006 issue, an open letter addressing the Israeli-Lebanese War, dated 27 July 2006 “Dialogue at Times of War”, and a keynote on “Can cultural action and dialogue contribute to conflict resolution”, addressed to a training seminar for youth workers and teachers in Nicosia, Cyprus, on 21 February 2007.