

## 5.2 Learning Dialogue Skills

### Dialogue between cultures?

Cultures do not dialogue. It is always human beings who communicate with each other. They are using languages and words which are part of “cultures” developed by many earlier generations and functioning as a medium of communication, for understanding as well as for misunderstanding. But as languages and the meaning of words are constantly evolving, so are cultures in general, cultures being understood in the wider sense adopted in 1982 by the UNESCO World Conference on Culture in Mexico City: Whatever human beings are doing in interaction with nature and with others, is culture, including languages, belief systems, values and habits they are passing on to the young ones. But since no culture is an island, there are always influences in all directions. Language is always a good example: words are borrowed from other languages, the new information and communication technologies give access to texts and images from all over the world: in this sense, there is a constant “dialogue between cultures”, but it is always a human being producing, sending and receiving information and adapting this to his or her own situation.

The true meaning of “dialogue” is, however, much more than such communication which I would describe as exchange of words, images, and gestures. In the words of an outstanding philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hans-Georg Gadamer, “dialogue starts with the assumption that the other might be right”.

Throughout history, the world was marked with both conflict and exchange, mistrust and cooperation, dialogue and monologue. History teaching has developed important tools for learning about history not only as a series of conflicts but also of mutual enrichment and exchange. This is important to encourage people of good will everywhere to continue to build bridges, well knowing that there will be always people with bad intentions who might destroy them. After the end of the Cold War, Europe has witnessed walls and borders falling down. We Europeans have a historic responsibility to share this with other regions, in particular with our Southern neighbours in the Mediterranean. But this requires a new thinking in Europe: with all enjoyment of new freedoms and liberties,

we should not incline towards inward-looking. Let us see what Southern traditions of hospitality have in common with European traditions of anti-racism; there is much room for mutual enrichment and learning.

## Dialogue in Context

Some people dream of an age of dialogue between cultures, as a new era following the settlement of present conflicts. We should remain realistic: Dialogue is inter-personal and needs always to be established anew. But dialogue needs always to be situated within a larger context to be meaningful.

And here we are facing a profound problem: More than before, many people including political leaders, tell us since 9/11 that either we live in a century which will be marked by a “clash of cultures and civilisations”, or that we have to do everything to prevent this. Both positions share a too narrow understanding of culture. Definitely, the mixture of cultures in which human beings are raised, is powerful, it is cultural heritage providing tools for communication, orientations, traditions, and spaces to live in. But human beings are not slaves; they are born with the potential to make their own choices. This is, in a nutshell, the definition of “quality of life” by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) which, in its Annual Human Development Report, gives highest rankings to countries where people are allowed to make many choices. This is why the Nordic countries traditionally are top, with their policies in favour of equal rights of women and men.

The actual dangers do not come from the images which are everywhere available in our globalised world and which are biased in their preference to dream worlds of rich people. This can be a root cause for conflicts, in creating anger of poor masses that feel – and actually are – disadvantaged and might be inclined to transform images of the inaccessible rich world into hostile conceptions guiding thought and action.

Since social conflicts between rich and poor exist in almost every country, I would not consider such confrontation of images a cultural conflict: Everybody is capable to see at least some root causes so that it remains a social conflict that calls for economic and political action. Real dangers start where social, economic or political conflicts

or tensions are masked by cultural differences. In most cases, it is not the distant “Other” who becomes victim of so-called cultural or religious clashes. The population of Bosnia and Herzegovina or of Ruanda lived for generations together, with even little or no visible social and cultural differences of their lifestyles and not even language. We have witnessed there and in many other places all over the world how very small cultural or religious differences can fuel conflicts and violence. The situation becomes dangerous wherever culture or religion is used for masking economic or political purposes. It is both a political and an educational challenge to disentangle political, economic, social, religious and cultural factors of conflicts and armed confrontation. It is essential to see how these factors interact. As soon as cultural pride and religious claims for truth enter a conflict scenario, its settlement through negotiation will become almost impossible. We need to see the whole context, but using the term “cultural conflict” is not appropriate, and it would be counter-productive.

## Beyond self-referential frames

Invoking universal values does not help much in cases of tensions along cultural or religious dividing lines. What we have witnessed early in 2006 with the cartoon issue, is a huge gap, it is a “clash of ignorance” (Edward Saïd) especially between Europe and the neighbouring Arab world.

How could we fill this gap? Non-partisan information is on high demand. Christians will not be able to learn respecting Islam, if they are given a text full of references to the Qur’an, and Muslims will have the same difficulty if confronted with a text full of citations from the Bible. We need to talk about such differences in a way that is not always self-referential. And we need to understand what beliefs are: it is a human act, trying to formulate one’s relation with truth or ultimate values. But such beliefs are still subject to human limitation. Human beings can claim truth but must acknowledge that others might have different claims.

But dreaming of non-partisan information about diversity is as unrealistic as drafting an “objective” history. There are always different perspectives. Information about diversity needs to be pluralistic; but it also needs to be different from a compilation of partisan narratives. Comparative social studies have merits in this regard. In identifying “func-

tional equivalents” between different cultural or religious traditions, they give way to recognition of a diversity of expressions of similar interests or desires.

A very interesting approach was recently tested in Sweden. The Museum of the World’s Cultures in Stockholm trained young volunteers as guides for citizens interested in visiting various places of worship in major Swedish cities. In listening to both, the host providing mostly the usual self-referential explanations of a Protestant or Catholic Church, a Sunnite or Shiite Mosque, or an Orthodox or Liberal Synagogue, and to the volunteers who add the element of an outside observer, the visitors start grasping the need to developing more than one perspective of looking at the same subject.

The real challenge is inviting people to dialogue who are not interested or even hostile. There should be no conditions. Europeans commit a major error when dividing Muslims into “moderates” and ”fundamentalists”. Dialogue with strong believers can only start with an invitation to partners to explain their beliefs. And then dialogue needs to be nourished by modesty and respect which should not be requested in the fist line but offered. It is always the first step that counts, the hand reached out, and not ready-made judgements.

It is an irony that comprehensive knowledge about religions is in most countries, if at all, only provided to those who call themselves non-believers. Those affiliated to religious communities receive, if there is religious education provided by schools, in most cases only instruction into their own religious tradition. But there are no non-believers. Human rights call upon non-discrimination along religion or any other belief and opinion. We do not even have an agreed definition of what “religions” are, as compared to “non-religious” people or organizations. There is urgent need to overcome self-reference in teaching and learning about cultural diversity and religious pluralism. The common frame of reference is the diversity of what human beings believe in, together with the non-discrimination principle of human rights.

“Learning about cultural diversity and religious pluralism” was one of the key recommendations of the High Level Group of Experts convened in 2003 by the then President of the European Commission Romano Prodi on “Dialogue between Peoples and Cultures in the Euro-Mediterranean Area. It is among the core recommendations of the United Nations High Level Group on an ”Alliance of Civilizations” (2006). And it is advocated by the experts convened in October 2006 by the Arab League and the Anna Lindh Foundation to recommend measures for “overcoming major misconcep-

tions between ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’” (section 3.4 of this publication). The Council of Europe and the Anna Lindh Foundation in cooperation with the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) started in 2006 a joint teacher training programme on cultural diversity and religious pluralism. A broad section of related teaching and learning materials is available in the Internet ([www.coe.int](http://www.coe.int) and [www.euromedalex.org](http://www.euromedalex.org)).

We need more people who act wherever others are discriminated or attacked because of their opinion or belief, or cultural or ethnic origin. Showing such civil courage is not always rewarded. It is a dream that people showing modesty instead of pride, listening at least as much than speaking, offering respect instead of requesting it, will be more contagious than those abusing cultural or religious differences for masking their own interests. But each individual attempt in learning such dialogue skills, followed by curiosity to try them out, is one step closer to such dreams coming true.

*Adapted from “New Avenues for the Dialogue between Cultures”, an interview with the author in February 2007 by the Egyptian sociologist Mona Taha for a handbook on intercultural dialogue to be published by the Swedish Institute in Alexandria.*