9. From Tolerance to Hospitality

A brief history of tolerance

Over centuries, the term tolerance was and is used to address a perceived or agreed need to overcome intolerance, discrimination, xenophobia, or hatred. Quite often, tolerance indicates an attitude of "tolerating something different from me and my way of life", either for rational grounds and/or for sake of being left in peace. Tolerance has usually a somewhat defending or passive connotation, unless it is explicitly combined with virtues such as "hospitality", "friendliness", or "openness".

Tolerance is often claimed to be a value fundamental for the European Enlightenment, and only to a lesser extent for other regions. There is, however, not much room for Euro-centric pride. From Charlemagne's genocide among pagan peoples who were not willing to convert to Christian faith, up to the American Bill of Rights 1776 and the French Code of Citizen's Rights some years later, it took Europe about 1000 years to abide to principles of at least religious tolerance. Interim tolerance edicts such as that of Nantes 1598 were revoked after the war of 30 years (1618-1648), that devastated large parts of Europe under Catholic and Protestant banners end ended with an agreement on "religious cleansing" in almost all of the around 1000 territories and states then existing in the continent. By the way, the Edict of Nantes did not show substantial progress, as compared to similar edicts of Roman emperors in the 2nd and 3rd century, and definitely not to the legislation on religious tolerance in Al Andalus, Spain under Arab rule, or in the Ottoman Empire. From a historical point of view, religious tolerance in Europe had to be imposed by enlightened leaders or revolutionary movements against long-standing opposition of Christian churches. The continent had to survive two world wars before the other essential aspects of tolerance of differences became subject to an international agreement, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which left us with a very comprehensive list of categories for non-discrimination "without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status".

The basic value of non-discrimination is more than tolerance. The Universal Declaration on Tolerance, adopted 1985 by the General Conference of UNESCO, promotes therefore "active tolerance", embracing and not only tolerating differences. This is exactly the core meaning of what we call today "diversity", to be recognized as wealth rather than burden

fur humankind, to be preserved as essential for the survival of humanity, as much as is biodiversity for nature. The finest definitions can be found in UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001), which is the first international standard recognizing diversity not only between states or whole ethnic or linguistic groups but at the level of the individual and social groups – with their multiple, overlapping and dynamic cultural identities.

This latest development reflects atrocities and genocides that happened recently, in Ruanda as in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and at too many other places of the world where neighbours turned over night into enemies. The mechanism is the same: only one aspect of identity is singled out as justification for mass killings, murder, rape and robbery. As a German, I can't forget that murderous Nazi ideology dehumanizing people by reducing them to one aspect of their multiple identities: Jewish, Sinti, Roma, Gay or Communist, before killing them for just that aspect.

We desperately need more tolerance, but tolerance is not enough. We need human rights fundamentalists, willing to intervene wherever human beings are discriminated – just for one aspect of their multiple belongings and identities.

Should we, then, bury the concept of tolerance? Not so fast. After such a long history of intolerance, we need to keep alive and revitalize commitment to active tolerance, mindful of a past that does not pass away. We need to grow strong motivation for working on providing human rights as "a common standard of achievement for all", to quote from the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948).

And we should also have a closer look at the history of Enlightened Europe: Achieving religious tolerance against Christian churches was one thing; but this did not preclude racism, colonization and wars undertaken by secular governments in the name of progress and civilization.

Europe gained civil rights and liberties against a mainstream of religious sectarianism. But the confrontation or separation of laicity and religious cultures had prevented the development of the necessary minimum of self-criticism in European Enlightenment. The last two centuries are marked by an ideology of enlightened universal reason claiming also moral rightness. We need an active civil society, constantly critical of claims for moral rightness of actors in a pluralist society. We need public dispute on what is ethically or morally right. We do not need ideologies which make people believe that those who are considered to be right would automatically do the right thing. For good reasons, modern social sciences promoted deconstruction and reconstruction of our categories of perception, thinking

and communication. Pragmatists from John Dewey to Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty and Juergen Habermas – despite their conceptual differences, all of them have advocated civil society movements challenging, in public, claims for who and for what is right. In a pluralist society, we need visible contributions of all religious groups. We have to overcome the artificial confrontation between "secular" and "religious" sectors of our societies. For very good reasons, the United Nations never defined "religion". Freedom of opinion includes not only freedom of belief, but also the freedom to make personal choices in building personal identities, composed of a multitude of belongings.

There remains one key question. Where are the limits of tolerance? The two most frequent responses are either: We cannot tolerate those who are themselves intolerant. Or: There can be no tolerance of those who are not respecting human rights. Who decides about who is eligible? This is a very tricky question which in Europe is answered mostly by oversimplification. There are Us who inherited the universal values (we Europeans), and Them (all the others) who need to be checked first because they are bound to cultural relativism or communitarian bias.

The world map of human rights cannot be drawn in black and white colours alone. Human rights are, according to an agreement achieved by the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993, an indivisible whole. Neither the regular country reports nor the results of special reports on the various human rights conventions allow for a simple classification of countries in those that are respecting human rights, and in those that are not. Nobody is perfect. Human rights are a common standard of achievement for all, a set of values universally agreed upon, a road map rather than a world map.

Based on such dynamic understanding of human rights, the recently refined human rights clause fits into the new international consensus on cultural diversity. To quote the compatibility clause from the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity (2005):

> *Article 2 – Guiding principles*
> 1. **Principle of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms**
> Cultural diversity can be protected and promoted only if human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, information and communication, as well as the ability of individuals to choose cultural expressions, are guaranteed. No one may invoke the provisions of this Convention in order to infringe human rights and fundamental freedoms as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or guaranteed by international law, or to limit the scope thereof.

Have religions become a polarizing or unifying force in the 21st century compared with the past? What are the causes?

From a historical or sociological point of view, religion has united and separated people over millennia as much as ethnicity or language did. As a dimension of human culture, religion unites first and foremost those who share the same. But no culture and no religion is an island, they are evolving, subject to exchange of heritage, syncretism, and creativity. And: no organized religion is homogeneous. The classical distinction provided by Max Weber, one of the founders of sociology of religion, is very pertinent: Every religious organization, he argues, started as a sectarian movement. And it develops at least four internal varieties: one guided by priests, others by laymen, or by prophets, or by spiritual-mystic leaders. Internal diversity of organized religions is too often disregarded; most spiritual movements, for example, share more features across different religions than with "fundamentalist" movements of the same religious tradition.

Consequently, I would not recommend a culturalist approach to answering the question. Neither culture nor its religious dimension is an independent factor. It is true that more than thousand years of European history are marked by tensions and wars along confessional or religious dividing lines. And, after the end of bloc confrontation during the Cold War, hundreds and thousands of smaller confrontations started to oppose people along dividing lines drawn along ethnic, linguistic, or religious differences. This point was made by the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, Javier Pérez de Cuéllar, qualifying those new confrontations as "narcissism of small differences", which in fact masks conflicts over scarce resources, in addition to the strife for cultural and religious rights of individuals and ethnic groups.

The split between laicity or secularism and religious cultures, which dominated more than hundred years after European Enlightenment, was a polarizing force that has mostly disappeared from the surface. The Catholic Church was one of the last major religious organizations accepting the international agreements on human rights as legitimate values, even without religious justification. The historical split, however, still exists in attitudes of people on both sides, whenever it comes to debates on "knowledge" versus "belief", where superiority-inferiority feelings seem to obscure many otherwise clear minds.

The inter-faith movement has gained ground and visibility, in particular over the last ten years. The first World's Parliament of Religions was convened already in 1893 in Chicago, at that time initiated by mostly spiritual movements from East and West. It

was revitalized only hundred years later, with now involving almost all major religions, including so-called traditional religions from the Polar circle or from Africa. The agenda has changed from spiritual issues to major world problems, as they are also on the Agenda of the United Nations: mitigation of religiously motivated violence, AIDS, access so safe water, refugees, external debt of developing countries, and reconciliation with aboriginal peoples are on the agenda of recent and forthcoming meetings.

To resume: in the windfall of predominantly secular governance, also religious communities changed. The monks of Burma are just one recent example for religious communities assuming responsibility for peace, justice and development inside their countries as well as at international level, as activists within civil society, and not as agents of polarization.

Main cause is the following: The international community, represented by the United Nations, has, finally, with the Millennium Declaration of 2000, agreed on the most pressing issues. And even fundamentalist secular movements, with only a few exceptions, have joined the call on religions for motivating people to act along the agreed-upon lines, putting the Millennium Agenda into practice.

The misuse of culture or religion for masking political or economic objectives was identified as one of the major risks by recent inter-religious and inter-cultural meetings.

Another risk has not yet been addressed to the necessary extent: the claim for possession of full truth, a virus that has infected in particular Christian and Muslim traditions, and created a fertile ground for all kinds of injustice and aggression. The problem is so fundamental that it cannot be properly addressed by only condemning violent religious fundamentalism.

Are religions, both within the realm of each religious belief, and in the relationship that individual religions bear with one another, currently factors of tolerance or intolerance?

My name is Traugott. Translated into Arabic, it could be: Jihad. The ongoing discussion on whether Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance, and whether all those who call for violence with reference to Jihad – which means special effort of believers – would follow a totally wrong interpretation of Islam, all this seems to me too limited in scope.

Each major religion has diversified since its very beginnings, and there is no such thing as ”*the* true Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, or Buddhist belief”. The word “belief”

is the key: we are talking about what human beings are doing, in putting into words and action what they believe in.

If we would just check the text of the Christian Bible (which incorporates the Jewish Torah) against the text of the Qur'an for references to tolerance, we would come to a surprising result: the Bible has only two direct references (in St. Paul's letters to his followers in Ephesus and Colossus), and the meaning is "tolerate those who are different with love and patience". The Qur'an is more specific, in recognizing that Allah has created diversity in humankind.

As a learned theologian, I am opposed to dealing with religious texts out of their historical context. A good example is the Qur'anic institution of a poll tax for non-Muslims living under protection of Muslim Governments. The Qur'an reflects a particular adaptation of tribute payments imposed on whole peoples or regions in the Roman and earlier empires which was developed in the Arabian Peninsula: a per head tax for Non-Muslims who did not pay the Islamic Zakat but received citizenship and protection in exchange for such taxes. Such taxation was a contemporary symbol for the respect of other religions and became fundamental for inter-religious tolerance in Al Andalus and in the Ottoman Empire, at times when Christian-governed parts of Europe did not provide their people with such an option.

More important than isolated quotations from holy books is the way in which believers in different faiths have taken guidance from those books for developing and practicing tolerance or intolerance. As a matter of fact, almost all religious and secular traditions share the moral principle of reciprocity, the "Golden Rule" which was raised by Immanuel Kant to the level of "categorical imperative" but which has a variety of roots, from moral advice in Pharaonic Egypt to Confucius' teachings in 6th century B.C.

Equally important is the principle that "there is no coercion in religion", implicitly shared by most religious organizations. It is explicitly stated in the Qur'an (suras 2:256, 10:99, and 18:29), and it was the key message sent in September 2006 to Pope Benedict XVI by 38 leaders of Muslim communities all over the world.[1]

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1 Open Letter to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, written and signed by leading Muslim scholars and leaders in response to Pope Benedict XVI's remarks on Islam at the Regensburg lecture on September 12, 2006, in: Islamica Magazine no. 18, 2006, pp. 25-32; online, with 100 signatures: http://www.islamicamagazine.com/issue18/openletter18_lowres.pdf.

Whereas it seems not too difficult to agree on such standards of morality between religions, it is important to acknowledge, in the light of inter-faith encounters over the last few decades, limits of interreligious dialogue and consensus. It seems as if faith-based organizations would have a built-in mechanism preventing them from full adherence to standards of non-discrimination. This mechanism is derived from another feature shared by most religions: salvation is reserved for true believers only. In everyday religious life, it is this claim for absolute truth that compromises the non-coercion principle or even the Golden Rule.

From a human rights perspective, the three following questions have been introduced to inter-religious encounters since 1948:

- Does the principle of equal dignity of cultures (with the human rights clause[2]) include recognition of equal dignity of all religions?

- Does it also include acknowledgment of equal dignity of secular groups and movements?

- Are religious organizations willing to cease missionary activities and active proselytism?

I recall a meeting, more than 30 years ago, organized by the World Council of Churches, which ended with a majority in favour of ceasing missionary activities, and strong minorities in favour of yes to the first and second questions.

Today, there are no more majorities for ceasing active mission anymore among Christian and Muslim organizations. Major Christian Churches fear the increasing success of what they call Christian sects. And it might, indeed, be unrealistic to expect that a religious leader would fully embrace religious pluralism, as this could undermine the claims for religious truth – the raison d'être of such organizations. Notable exceptions are a large number of spiritual movements.

In order not to overstress inter-religious encounters, it seems that we would need to focus the three questions to two issues: (1) the equal dignity of all human beings; and (2) the elaboration of a code of conduct for missionary activities, combined with the recognition

2 Most recent wording from the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity is cited above on page 161.

of so-called traditional religions (which is practised for the last ten years by the World Council of Churches). The new agenda of the World Parliament of Religions includes the concept that religions shall make their contributions to solve major global problems. It also includes stimulations of a public debate about what is right and what is wrong, side by side with secular groups and organizations.

What possible strategies, complementary or alternative to intercultural dialogue, can one envisage in order to building an enabling environment for tolerance to prevail?

No more "representative" dialogue

I share the advice recently addressed by Jean-Pierre Willaime, one of the leading European specialists in sociology of religions, to the Council of Europe: While recognizing the importance of religions in society, secular organizations should refrain from engaging themselves in inter-religious dialogue; they should deal with the cultural dimension of religion in the context of inter-cultural dialogue.

Indeed, whenever secular organizations went to hand-picking "religious leaders" for a podium, the dialogue event usually ended with shallow results, because the participants felt caught in the jacket of representatives of whole religions. The situation in most dialogue events organized by religious communities is different: Increasingly, even non-hierarchical religious communities have started to designate speakers for such events, including traditional African religions such as the Yoruba religion from Nigeria. This is very helpful for enlisting communities to participate in solving common problems. But as soon as inter-faith issues are on the table, the straitjacket is back.

As a matter of principle, "representative" forms of intercultural dialogue should be avoided, whether the religious dimension is on the agenda or not, unless inter-organizational agreements are to be negotiated.

Good practice

There is good practice in inter-religious dialogue that could inspire dealing with religion in inter-cultural dialogue events: Since, for example, the Parliament of the World's

Religions and the World Council of Churches address increasingly global problems, religious participants in inter-cultural dialogue should not be constantly invited to address the "religious dimension". They should be given a chance to address whatever issue, and religious communities should be invited to play their role in public debates along with other civil society organizations.

On the other hand, the increasing level of mutuality and joint reflection in inter-cultural dialogue could inspire inter-religious undertakings. European and Arab experts are now able to consider jointly Islamic Art (which is one of the success stories of the Euro-Mediterranean Heritage project). Why should participants in inter-religious meetings always be confined to speaking about their own religious tradition and belief? There would be a healthy climate change resulting from open invitations of Christian churches to Muslims to express their perception of Christian beliefs, and the other way round. There is no monopoly in interpretation of religions.

Culture-sensitive language

If we see "active tolerance" as a core ingredient of building commitment of civil society to working for the "common standards of achievement for all", established with the Human Rights, and to solving global problems, we need to work hard in developing a common language which is culture-sensitive. The Human Rights have been formulated without any explicit recourse to specific cultures or religions. But the language is not as motivating as it could be in everyday life. Every approach to link human rights to specific cultural or religious environments runs high risks: Cultural traditions can be invoked as an excuse for limiting the scope of human rights – this is why the United Nations had to develop the compatibility clause in normative texts on diversity. But we could and should be more creative. Rather than looking for cultural exceptions, we should look for good practice in ensuring human rights in different cultural contexts, for functionally equivalent cultural expressions of human rights.

One example would be to bring together the tradition of "hospitality" and the "anti-movements", "anti racism", "anti-xenophobia", "anti-anti-Semitism" or "anti-Islamophobia". A more assertive use of diversity can be motivating: The Council of Europe has found persuasive wording for its recent youth campaign, with the title "all different, all equal". Adding to this the spice of hospitality could create a common language for discussion not only about what different cultures have in common, but also about differences.

Addressing religious differences

Involving religious communities in the development of a common language about differences seems to be particularly difficult. Usually, when it comes to address human rights in a given religious context, religious believers tend to insist in their religious values being either more important or at least being the roots and, therefore, deeper. The "Sharia clause" invoked by a number of Islamic States in the ratification of human rights conventions, or the difficulties encountered by the Catholic Church before expressing full approval of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are outstanding examples of such tendencies. I am advocating a more embracing strategy. We need to address crucial issues inherent to most religions such as the tension between the recognition of belief as an act of free will (the *no-coercion* principle) and claims for absolute truth. Almost all religious leaders would agree with a call for modesty of the believer, who never can be in possession of absolute truth, who is subject to errors and wrong perceptions or conclusions, as compared to God.

All religions share a call on believers to follow a code of ethics. A religious-sensitive language could address the motivating ground, be it fear of the final Day of Judgment, or, more assertive, "working for the arrival of the Kingdom of God". Using religion-specific terms in the context of inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue should not be avoided but encouraged, given that the functional equivalence between such expressions of specific beliefs is communicated. Most attempts to formulate a global ethics restrict themselves to what religions have in common, such as the Golden Rule. It is important to go one step further in also addressing differences between and within religious traditions and beliefs.

The search for a common language about differences should also build bridges between so-called secular and religious people. A key issue is the relation between religious and scientific truth. Usually, this issue is badly addressed, with one side ridiculizing belief as "lack of knowledge", and the other relativizing scientific knowledge as lacking the element of absolute truth which only religion could provide. Such unhealthy confrontation can be avoided with more sensitive and pertinent language: Whereas scientific truth is subject to change every day, with acquisition of new knowledge, religious truth is believed being eternal. With a little bit of modesty on both sides, secular and religious communities can participate in public discourse on claims for what is wrong and what is right, on scientific and on religious truth, and join forces to work towards common standards of achievement for all.

Cooperation is dialogue in practice

Intercultural dialogue is, too often, limited to discourse. Verbal communication is not the only and, possibly, not always the best instrument for learning how to appreciate diversity. All those with experience in youth exchange will agree that the dynamics of intercultural youth encounters rely on the possibility of face-to-face meetings without rigid agendas. One of my most rewarding experiences was a double-entry simulation game with young people from Europe and the Arab States region. The young women had been invited to perform as male Government ministers of another country, and the young men to perform as their chief advisors on gender issues. The performance was interesting. Even more interesting were the two days preceding this performance: I could see young people sitting together and seeking first-hand information from other countries and the other gender, instead of hitting alone their keyboards and googling the information required – it was one of the most enjoyable experiences with informal inter-cultural learning.

Another dimension is music and arts: There is no better field for learning that diversity is making us richer, instead of being a threat.

Finally, working together is an experience that cannot be replaced by verbal communication. Sharing the pride of joint products creates very strong bonds across otherwise dividing lines. It is important to provide enough space for teamwork in intercultural encounters. The effect will be the more lasting, the more the joint product is something that can be shared with others, such as a jointly produced video, a piece of art, or a report. Working together across cultures needs to be established not only during occasional encounters; it should be a longer-term option. One of the most appealing projects I could support during my term of office as Director of the Anna Lindh Euro-Mediterranean Foundation for the Dialogue between Cultures is the establishment of multi-national teams of young researchers. Joint research without borders should not be a privilege of senior scientists or teams being considered for a Nobel Prize. Acquisition and sharing of knowledge in multi-national teams should be an opportunity for all young people interested in such experience – my personal recommendation for the next decade of AFS International.

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