Promoting Dialogue to Support
a Human Rights Culture

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Dialogue is a starting point for those who believe in the need to create a public ethic rooted in the respect of human rights. In order to recognize the dignity of the other person we need to know his/her culture. The meetings among intellectuals of the Mediterranean area, planned after the Barcelona partnership in 1995, never stopped, but went on even after 9/11, and the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq. The increasing number of encounters is a positive result, even if the tone of discussion can at times be polemical; in most cases the plea of the parts involved in dialogue has been for a change in communication, aiming at abolishing most of their reciprocal stereotyped images. Not much has been done yet, but it has strengthened the conviction that dialogue is the only way to a peaceful solution of conflicts: therefore we persevere in the direction of building dialogue.

The principle of Human Rights revolves around mutual respect. By making sure first of all that everyone is aware of human rights—and, often, of the lack of human rights around the world and even in one's own country—people can be motivated to further this human rights culture. Securing human rights protects the individual, based on the awareness that each person is precious and irreplaceable. The purpose of upholding human rights is to enable all people to live with dignity and fulfil their potential. But our culture continues to view people as masses, not as individuals, as Daisaku Ikeda stressed in his latest peace proposal to the United Nations[1]. At the core of the question there is a problem: all too often the media treat groups of people as objects, as numbers and statistics, which makes it easier to attack them. Therefore it is

urgent to develop our awareness and make greater efforts to promote reciprocal knowledge. In Europe there is an increasing number of Muslim immigrants coming from Africa and Middle East. Among them many were brought up with a strong feeling of mistrust towards the former colonial powers. In particular these prejudices grew in the Arab countries after the creation of the state of Israel (1948). Furthermore, relations with the western powers deteriorated during the Lebanese civil war (1975/85) until they reached a critical point with the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq after the tragedy of 9/11.

Subsequent to the twin tower disaster the western media launched an attack against Islamic countries accusing many regimes of supporting terrorist groups, while for their part the Arab media denounce western governments for their lack of humanity and respect for the others.

While the media in Europe focus on a policy promoting fear (on account of the economic crises) and selfishness (to protect welfare), the Arab Media expose the brute violence of the western armies in Iraq and the Israeli army in Gaza[2]. This kind of communication is fuelling a serious upsurge of racism and intolerance among the native Europeans against immigrants while, on the other hand, in the peripheries of the big cities we witness the violent rebellion of the second generations of immigrants against the status symbols of the middle class. They are poor and marginalised, and so believe that it is impossible to fulfil their parents' dreams of social improvement. It also happens that groups of new immigrants yearn for a more homogeneous community, more unitary, fighting with the culture of the hosting country. In such cases it would be useful to bring about debate among the social representatives and the institutions; these would create the required equilibrium between the community and the individuals in order to establish a climate of tolerance to guarantee the safeguarding of citizens, as Richard Walzer hopes[3].

Why is Islam always at the heart of so many of these clashes? A number of studies and analyses were carried out after publication of the Hungtinton thesis on the Clash of civilizations. According to the Syrian philosopher Sadik al-Azm, Islam is the major religion in the periphery; it has played and still plays the role of vehicle of protest[4]. It is also the

creed that gives an answer to the need for spiritual community in the land of migrations.

We observe that in the eastern countries, where there is a serious lack of freedom, Islam has become the ideology which gives hopes to the poor; the mosque is the place where people can still find a glimpse of humanity. What happens is that there is a political use of people's needs for solidarity. Both western and eastern media use images in a way that stimulates feelings of compassion and sense of solidarity for "their own people" to accuse the "Other" and justify hatred against the culture responsible for these crimes. Where there is a lack of correct information the power of other rights decreases.

The media are in fact powerful means of communication and have influenced public opinion since the Middle Ages, when the storytellers were already spreading religious propaganda to support the Crusades against the Muslims to free the holy land from their presence. Until now neither European nor Arab school history books give an objective version of these events. Even the more serious analyses in western newspapers and magazines, when it comes to describing the history of the Middle East in the last century, stress the failure of Arab governments to promote development and democracy. The old dichotomy West versus East after the fall of the Berlin wall has slowly shifted to the centre against periphery contrast, democratic countries against non-democratic countries.

From the Arab point of view the western countries are only interested in exploiting the petrol resources and willing to implement their geopolitical strategies over the area to protect Israel.

In order to create a better coexistence it is necessary to fight generalisations and prejudices, and promote cultural exchanges to harmonize the relations in the different fields of human activity including, crucially education, as well as cultural and economic exchange. It is important to monitor the impact of cultural globalization in the different areas to verify how fast and in what direction our societies are changing. There are contradictory tendencies: on one hand we have a spread of communication among students of different cultural origin thanks to Internet, while on the other hand there are growing difficulties in travel due to the special laws promulgated after 9/11 attacks.

World economic crises and restrictive immigration laws have paved the way to increasing illegal immigration. When the so-called boat people survive the trip to the land of milk and honey, either they enter as illegal workers in the black market or they are interned in special camps until they are repatriated.

A mirror for our humanity: Positive aspects of meeting other cultures

Europe has freedom and democracy but mainly for its own citizen, who are losing the sense of compassion, affirms the German social scientist Ralph Dahrendorf in a recent study. He clearly speaks of lack of heart[5]. Have westerners lost their hearts? Watching television programmes we find that there is a strong sense of compassion but it has a limit: our compassion goes to our like, not to the "immigrants". More often than not foreigners are presented as illegal and violent, or associated with crimes. As for the news concerning wars, it appears to be very distant from our concerns, while violent scenes of blood and destruction are more frequently associated with a close terrorist attack. In presenting the news it is never clear who made the attack, against whom and for what reason, but it is always attributed to an ill defined terrorist group. Cultural conflicts may hide conflicts of interests and these may be at their deep roots, but this is not fully evident on a superficial glance on the facts.

Sadik al-Azm quotes Junger Habermas's *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1968) to highlight that western behaviour is motivated by interest[6]. The theory of the German philosopher is much more sophisticated and here I will not try to confute al-Azm. Habermas also considers the possibility to use a communicative rationality rather than instrumental rationality; while the latter drives us to egoism and destruction, the former could lead us to look and understand the other.

This could be a positive antidote to Sadik al-Azm's remark that western materialism expresses a major trend in western consciousness, especially if he sees materialism linked to egoism, which is itself an expression of extreme individualism. Anyway this is not the ultimate trend, and it can still be changed for everybody's sake.

As Sebastiano Maffettone points out, intercultural dialogue does not uproot the individual from his cultural context but serves to enhance

communication and mutual understanding[7]. The question is, where to begin?

Change in communication is possible if there is reciprocal knowledge of the ideas of the others, their opinions and points of view. It could be useful to inquire how cultural exchanges operated in the past and how they work now, in the age of mass communication. We could compare the impact of cultural globalization in the different areas to verify how our societies are changing, how the young generations react to the fast-food culture spread by the new means of communication. How deep is the effect of these events on cultural and economic choices, on philosophical thought as well as scientific research programmes.

A research project directed by Taher Labib shows that the travel literature of the Arabs in the 19th century in Europe reflects a vision of the others strongly conditioned by their point of view. In their eyes they had the image of the Nile; they could not even consider the Seine as something different, simply as a French river. They had the same prejudice about manners and customs, just as the Orientalist Lane showed in his famous books on the Egyptians. Edward Said's book should be read and interpreted once again because in his critique of Orientalism he denounces the difficulty involved in considering things starting from another point of view, which is not one's own[8].

In this respect university projects could usefully compare the different cultural and scientific experiences to see the impact these had, and still have, when confronted with other cultures. The question is to understand "how do the others live their reality from within?". How can we use our abilities to improve our relations, how effective can we be in changing the present approach in our fields of competence? It is a challenge, but we have the means to find solutions if we share our experiences.

We live in a multicultural world where diversities are like the many faces of a diamond, our task is to find the right answers viewing the problem with different approaches. To look at things from many points of view gives a better understanding of complex realities. Debates and meetings among intellectuals and students of the opposite shores of the Mediterranean has produced rich and positive discussions on a range of items. What certainly emerged was the need to learn more and

to listen to others' points of view[9]. The results of these meetings reveals that the intellectual today, to use an expression of Edward Said, has the role of the spectator, must feel and describe the time and indicate how and where action is needed to create a field of coexistence rather than a field of war[10].

On the needs of dialogue within our societies

Dialogue is necessary in all fields to foster understanding and accomplishment of common action, even before applying it heterogeneous groups. The first evidence comes with a simple glance at a turbulent relationship, in the family or society alike, where the absence of debate opens the way to the monologue of the stronger one, and such behaviour easily leads to abuse. In the public debate the absence of dialogue between opponents paves the way to the end of democracy.

These are good reasons to press for taking part in the general debate. Intellectuals must live their own time; they cannot deny their contribution to the civil society. In the Twenties Antonio Gramsci wrote[11]:

"I hate the indifferent. I believe that living means being partisan. There cannot be strangers to the city. Those who really live cannot but be citizens and partisans. Indifference and abulia is parasitism, cowardice, it is not life. For these reasons I hate the indifferent."

Indifference is the wall that separates us from the others; it is a wall of silence behind which we hide "to protect the treasure of our personal certainties" as Norberto Bobbio said with regard to the silence of Italian intellectuals in the period after the post-fascist crises. In times of historical crises the need emerges to clutch at certainties, which attract even if it is clear that they are false. Our certainties are so fragile that we need to protect them from other people's certainties. To explain this idea the Italian philosopher takes the example of the monks in the Middle Ages sheltered in the monasteries to escape barbarism. A lively faith was thus transformed into a dogmatic faith. In the same way cultural life becomes asphyxial if it hides behind silence, but the intellectual's duty is to understand and therefore he must "forego the comfortable policy of seclusion".

Bobbio alluded the seclusion of the Italian intellectuals after fas-

cism; their silence was the reaction to repulsion for the bombastic and bloody language of fascism[12].

A few years later Hanna Arendt identified in superficiality the element that leads away from truth; lack of awareness entails the incapacity to think and evaluate; it conveys the feeling that matters do not concern us. Feeling detached from reality gives a sense of being "far away, powerless" with regard to the possibility to act and produce effects to change the course of things[13].

The Syrian poet Nizār Qabbāni, in the wake of defeat in the six-day war, evokes in a few lines bitter awareness of the high price to be paid for ignorance:

> "In my land,
> where the simple weep,
> and live in the light they do not see,
> in my land the people live without eyes,
> the simple weep
> pray
> fornicate
> living in resignation
> as ever
> and invoke the crescent moon:
> "oh moon...!"
> Oh spring dripping with diamonds,
> Hashīsh, and stupor!"[14]

The magic effect of moonlight distracts the poor from their misery and defeats of every day, deluding with the joy of an evening turning thought away from the real problems. The poet realises that unawareness, like a drug, renders it impossible to change hard realities by coming face to face with facts. The problem is how to dispel illusion. For Arendt dialogue is the only way to tackle that mere opinion, tantamount to illusion, deemed an indispensable requisite by the powers. She also points out that "the most autocratic of sovereigns or tyrants could never rise to power, let alone conserve it, without the support of people who share

their opinion"[15].

Hence the need to pursue dialogue within one's own society for reawakening to the realities of contingent situations. To restore confidence in dialogue silence must be broken, the certainties reappraised upon which rest our dogmatism, any dogmatism, comparing them with the ideas of the others and questioning them; as Bobbio pointed out, "dialogue forces us to abandon the presumption that the others are wrong simply because they do not think as we do".

Sadik al-Azm has recently underlined the need to enhance the dialogue within the Arab world because he believes that only a state based on citizenship can prevent sectarianism and defend the right of opinion.

An example of these difficulties is offered by the incident that occurred in November 2008 in Algeria, where the Director of the National Library in Alger was dismissed because he had invited Adonis for a conference. The poet in his speech had warned against those religious figures who are transforming Islam into an institution. Our press did not even mention the event, while in the Arab world there was an upsurge of intellectuals against the minister of culture (Khalida [Toumi]) who had fired the man.

The need for dialogue emerges whenever a peace process is to be entered upon or, at the end of a conflict, to bring about recognition for the parties involved of the principle that the others' human rights must be respected.

The spread and relative facilitation of exchange in international relations has multiplied the need to find common ethical values. Thus the difficulties characterising debate within one nation have grown exponentially through transference to the global dimension.

There has been a proliferation of protagonists in the dialogue, and pretences to hold the absolute truth become ever more grotesque. The only communication possible among intellectuals is dialogue - the most appropriate language - as contrasted with the forms of rhetoric that demagogues resort to in order to sway the masses.

Present crises in the North-South of Mediterranean relations

Is it true, as some intellectuals of the other shore of the

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Mediterranean argue, that meetings on dialogue are useless?

The Syrian poet Adonis has recently argued that dialogue is not always neutral; behind an apparently peaceful call for dialogue economic interests are hiding. The most famous Arab poet believes that dialogue can be possible only among artists because they work on the same footing, there is no prejudice, no one is the old colonizer nor the newly colonized[16].

The Moroccan intellectual Muhammad Bannīs wonders how it can still be possible to speak seriously of dialogue when researchers and students on the southern side of the Mediterranean cannot move freely to come and study in Europe with all the barriers against terrorism immigration raised in the last few years[17].

The Egyptian philosopher Hasan Hanafy writes that intercultural dialogue can help remove prejudices and therefore urgently calls for it. But the Egyptian philosopher also warns us about the present difficulties we face while promoting a culture of mutual understanding[18].

In the light of the points made so far, it is clear that the realties are far more complex and various than they seem; the perception each has of the realities interacts with that of the others and undergoes constant change. The intellectuals have the advantage of a greater capacity to recognise and formulate these changes, and cannot, indeed must not, forego the opportunity to pass this new understanding on to students and the public at large. The price would be exorbitant, since the void left by lack of communication would be systematically filled by diffidence and incomprehension, as often happens in university and social environments.

In the Middle East it is this lack of linkage between intellectuals and public opinion that lies behind the further complications in relations between East and West.

At the beginning of the 19th century, in the Middle East as in other non-industrialised countries, contact with Europe technological innovation led the more aware and cultured to embrace modern European thought and adapt it to their Weltenschaung[19]. However, the rapid evolution of élite has left a gap with the masses still clinging to popular beliefs and a conservative approach to religion. By the mid-20th century the nationalist movements seemed to have bridged this gap

thanks to the unifying ideology of Arabism to begin with, and then the Pan-Arabism of Nasser.

The fear of nationalist-social projects shows that the old gap still exists with, on one side, the ruling class, ever more firmly clinging to its privileges and, on the other side, the masses, ever poorer and in need of a salvific ideology.

Subsequent to the defeat experienced in the war of 1967 between intellectuals and the ruling powers, a further fracture has occurred; the brief idyll has faded away since denunciation of the failure of the military regimes in planning and handling the economy. The intellectual avant-garde have continued to seek solutions to the crisis of the Middle East in the modern ideologies of the West, moving yet further away from the vision of reality perceived by the masses. The masses, in the meantime, have found an answer to the social and identity crisis in the messianic messages sent out by the radical Islamic movements, the only ones able to anchor the ancient culture in new hopes of rebirth and liberation. The lack of communication hampering the westernised intellectuals in their efforts to reinterpret their tradition in a modern world has left ample room for the rhetoric of the demagogues of certain Islamic movements which, however, the underprivileged find more comprehensible. On top of this problem, in many countries, is the failure of a flimsy state-run welfare system driving the have-nots to resort to Islamic solidarity. Thanks to the aid distributed by Muslim benefactors through the mosques, the people have managed to survive various crises (from the earthquakes in Morocco and Egypt to the wars in Iraq and Lebanon and the latest attack on Gaza), but at the cost of losing confidence in the secular, nationalist project of western inspiration.

In the situation outlined here the media on either side of the Mediterranean fail to observe the neutrality necessary to foster dialogue within or without for, by pandering to the fears and prejudices of their audience they ultimately place responsibility for the crisis on the "others".

As for the Arab intellectuals, outside the university sphere they are able to make contact at the local level only through the action of local and foreign non-governmental organisations. On the other hand, as Muhammad Bannīs points out, the intellectuals cannot leave dialogue to

the technocrats and religious leaders if they wish to conserve some hope of developing democracy on the south side of the Mediterranean as on the north side[20].

It is our responsibility to act now

We live in an age of fast communication, and we are ever exposed to stereotyped images, so numerous that we do not have time to react. We are getting accustomed to hearing discriminatory discourse and we have the feeling that there is not much we can do about it. Serious studies have proved that abuse of information can create mistrust and panic. Many years ago Hannah Arendt warned the intellectuals to take up a position against the increasing climate of discrimination. She showed in her *Banality of Evil* how easy it can be to comment evil acts. Nowadays we can see how fast and dangerous the climate of indifference is growing in the face of human crimes.

Working for dialogue can simply mean to becoming more aware of the hatred created by the images broadcast by the media. The question is: what can we do to create a different trend? What are we planning to do in order to face the growth of reciprocal disbelief between the two shores of the Mediterranean, between the centre and the periphery of our cities?

Where there is no dialogue there are walls of hatred and violence: therefore it is our responsibility to act now, because we do not have the right to leave to the next generation a world in worse condition than that we found it.

If we are willing to create dialogue on a basis of respect for the other's culture and belief we must put aside our personal convictions, for a while, and pay attention to the other's point of view. We can be real partners in promoting cultural activities, and just by doing so we will be working for the good of us all.

Notes

1) Daisaku Ikeda, "Toward humanitarian competition", also available in http://www.sgi.org/peace2009sum.html
2) See the interesting testimony given by Fatema Mernissi, *Islam e democrazia, paura della modernità* (*Islam and democracy. Fear of the*

Modern World, Luchterhand 1992), Firenze, Giunti 2002, pp. 24–7, 40, 44–5,7.

3) R. Walzer, *Sulla tolleranza* (On Tolerance, Yale University Press 1997), Roma, Laterza, 2003 pp. 53–4, 153–5.

4) S. AL-Azm, "Sadik al-Azm on Islamism", available on http://gypsyscholarship.blogspot.com/2008/04/sadik-al-azm-on-islamism.html

5) R. Dahrendorf, "Se torna l'uomo forte" in *Internazionale*, (784) 27 february 2009 pp. 32–8.

6) J. Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, transl. T. Mc Carthy, Boston, Beacon Press 1984, vi, 18, 86, 95; Sadik al-Azm, cit.

7) S. Maffettone "Global Legitimation and Reasonableness" in *Reasonableness and law ed. by Bongiovanni, Sartor Valentini*, Springer 2009, pp. 147–161; S. Maffettone, *La pensabilità del mondo* (World thinkability), Milan, Il Saggiatore 2006, p. 145.

8) E. W. Lane, *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*, London; E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguins Books,

9) The public discussion and academic study of public ethics and global politics have grown exponentially, due at least partly to globalization and the problems of governance and social justice that it raises. In the last few years the University of Naples "L'Orientale" has organized many conferences, special seminars, summer schools and documentary film showings according special attention to the plurality of voices in the debate. Wars, ethnic or religious conflicts and the emergence of racism in Europe were presented taking into account the point of view of the different parts involved. Recently the foundation of the new Centre of Ethics and Global Politics at LUISS University in Rome promoted a series of activities under the direction of a multicultural, high-level steering committee.

10) Said, *Humanisme et democratie* (Humanism and Democratic Criticism, Columbia University Press 2004) Paris, Fayard 2005, pp. 242, 244.

11) A. Gramsci, "La città futura", 11 February 1917

12) Reference is to an essay by Natalia Ginzburg, "Silenzio", in Cultura e realtà, 1951, n. 3–4, pp. 1–6, cfr. N. Bobbio, *Politica e cultura*, Einaudi (I 1955), 2005, pp. 26–8.

13) H. Arendt, *La banalità del male. Eichman a Gerusalemme*, (*Eichman in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York The Viking Press

1963) Milano, Feltrinelli 1964, pp. 33, 290

14) F.M. Corrao, *Antologia della poesia araba*, La Biblioteca di Repubblica, Rome, 2004, pp.

15) H. Arendt, *Verità e politica*, (*Truth and Politics*, The Viking Press 1968), Torin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1995, p. 36.

16) Adonis inaugural speech of the conference "Buildin Democracy: a Mediterranean Project" LUISS University, Venice 29–30 June 2006, in print.

17) M. Bennis, "Entre deux peurs" in « Panoramique » *Marier le Maghreb à l'Union européenne?*, Editions Corle France Editions Eddif, Courbevoie-Casablanca 1999, 41, pp. 35–7; Id. *Il Mediterraneo e la parola*, edited by F.M. Corrao and M. Donnzelli, Donzelli, Rome 2009

18) Hasan Hanafi's speech given in the occasion of the conference "Rebuilding Dialogue with the Arab World" LUISS University Rome 5–6 December 2008, in print.

19) A significant example is offered by the Egyptian intellectual Tahā Husayn in his *Mustaqbal al-thaqāfa fi Misr* (The future of Culture in Egypt), Dār al-Ma'ārif 1938 ; id., *al-Ayyam* (The days, Cairo, 1926) (it. transl. U. Rizzitano, *I giorni*, Roma, IPO 1965; *Memorie*, Mazara del Vallo, 1985). S. Kassir, *L'infelicità araba* (Considération sur le malheur arabe, Arles, Actes Sud 2004), Torino, Einaudi, 2006, p. 40.

20) M. Bannīs, "La cultura del Mediterraneo", in *Il Mediterraneo e la parola, cit.,* pp. 24–5.

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