

THE RELEVANCE OF A HUMANISTIC EDUCATION TO INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

Francesca M. Corrao

After the bloody events of 9/11 it became evident to US diplomacy that hatred against the US Government had reached its peak in the MENA region, where people experienced a dramatic postcolonial history¹. US politicians chose to open a new page in the history of diplomacy inaugurating the so called Public Diplomacy. The idea was to develop dialogue with Islamic countries. To achieve this goal it was decided to open up more friendly and direct contact with the people, starting with the creation of a common place for communication on the web. The initiative, at the outset was due to the good will of Embassy functionaries, but soon it became a worldwide practice².

Some evidence shows that this initiative can be connected with the spread of NGO training in Nonviolent activities in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. It is in fact worth recalling that during the civil war

1 MENA stands for the Middle East and North Africa area. A proposal for a new approach to the Middle East to correct the problematic attitude of US foreign policy under G.W. Bush was made by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former National Security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, see Z. Brzezinski, *Second Chance: Three Presidents and the Crises of American Superpower*, Basic Books, New York, 2007. On Public Diplomacy see N. Cull, *WikiLeaks, public diplomacy 2.0 and the state of digital public diplomacy, Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, USC Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism, Los Angeles, 2011.

2 A virtual platform spread information and services ensuring a proper digital presence of the State Department within the States and Abroad. Through the new platform "Diplomatic Note" American diplomats recount episodes of their actions also adding short drafting on diplomatic activities; the so called "DipNote" Bloggers are concerned with the presentation inside that blog of ideas and tips of the diplomatic staff and also act as a reporter of international missions of Hillary Clinton.

in the former Yugoslavia, the wild spread of violence stimulated some small groups to train in Nonviolence. One of these groups, Otpor, was able to boycott the Milosevic regime. The group had some success as they used the new media to gather 70 thousand secretly active members³.

A few years later some activists in Egypt were fascinated by Gene Sharp's theories on Nonviolent action, and did some training just before the Arab revolutions broke out⁴.

During the revolution that started on January 25th in Egypt, it was surprising to see on television screen the firm peaceful protest of the people against the brutal attack of President Mubarak's police. It was evident that in the square a mature awareness of non-violent protest was widespread. In March, after Mubarak had abandoned power, the Council of the Military force ruled the country toward a democratic government, established a commission to draft the new constitution and arrested the former president and some of those responsible for the violent attack on the protestors. Nevertheless, the Minister for State Security, Mansur al-Issawi, did not order the arrest of the criminals who destroyed a church in the south of the country, nor did he prevent the police from attacking a peaceful sit-in at Cairo University violently. The Egyptian writer Alaa Al-Aswany wrote in the press denouncing this unreasonable

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- 3 K. Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies*, Minneapolis University of Minnesota Press, 2005; two interesting, and yet different, analyses of the influence of the Media in Arab Revolutions are in C. Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere and Political Change", in *Foreign Affairs*, n. 90, 2011, pp. 28–41; M. Gladwell, "Small change. Why the Revolution will not be Tweeted", 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-3>, last visit 26/02/2014.
- 4 G. Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Boston, Porter Sargent 1973. There are few research on Nonviolent movements in MENA region, see M.J. Stephan (eds.), *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization and Governance in the Middle East*, New York Palgrave MacMillan, 2010; F.M. Corrao, "The Influence of Ghandi's Ideals in Some Current Islamic Experience: Tahrir Square and Palestine", in *TŌYŌ TETSUGAKU KENKYŪJO KIYŌ*, ed. THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL PHILOSOPHY, Tokyo, pp. 189–202. President Obama made an important speech at Cairo University on US policies for the promotion of democracy, see B. Obama, "Remarks by the President at Cairo University", 4 June 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>.

behaviour but did not receive an answer⁵.

In June “Freedom and Justice”, the Muslim Brothers’ political party, won the election. As soon as their government was appointed it started repressing the protest of the oppositions and in a few months Egypt was on the verge of civil war. One year later (June 2012) millions of Egyptians gathered peacefully in the squares of the country calling for the end of the Freedom and Justice Government, accused of violating basic civil rights. Under the “protection” of the Military council General al-Sissi formed a new Government, with representatives from all the political parties; the former Prime Minister Mursi was imprisoned and the “Freedom and Justice” party was outlawed. Soon after this event bloody riots broke out and a society that seemed mature for debate and peaceful protest was ravaged by violence. The brief experience of mutual support among different groups of people that emerged during the days of the revolution disappeared, giving way to a general climate of hatred and mistrust.

Among the various factors that are alienating many young Egyptians and making them more susceptible to radicalization, several stand out: abuses related to the massive use of detention since the Mohammad Mursi presidency; lack of accountability for killings; exclusions of most Islamists from politics and public life; brutal methods used in the marginalized Sinai region. The persistence of the economic crisis and the violent repression is fuelling mistrust among the citizens, and the general climate of warfare is spreading terror in the MENA regions.

Ever since the ideals of the French revolution and the Declaration of Human rights found circulation in Egypt, they have been greeted with enthusiasm by enlightened young generations of intellectuals. Unfortunately, however, they have been systematically disregarded by the local governments and received insufficient support from the western powers.

Before 2011 widespread human rights abuses drove Egyptians to organize non-governmental associations and these, thank to the web, could share opinions and organize their peaceful protest against the government, finding support in western opinion. In the post-revolution

5 A. Al-Aswany, “Chi sta spingendo l’Egitto verso il caos?” (Who is driving Egypt to chaos) in A. Al-Aswany, *La Rivoluzione Egiziana (The Egyptian Revolution)*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2011, p. 74–78 (*On the State of Egypt*, New York, Vintage Books, 2011).

political transition the European community showed a wavering attitude toward the newly formed governments, partly because of their lack of experience and also on account of their political intransigence; the western democratic countries did not back these countries, which were facing serious economic difficulties that led them to accept support from the Gulf countries, while a widespread sense of frustration and mistrust grew against the West. Most western powers had protected and supported the dictators. The Gulf countries backed the religious governments, and their supporters became more aggressive against the secular wing of the movement. In the Mediterranean area political discourse became violent and soon the attitude developed to ignore the opinion of the others.

In Libya, Iraq and Syria the dramatic explosion of civil war has been faced with the violent attack of organized military forces financed by external powers, such as the ISIS group (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), which has recently proclaimed the establishment of a Caliphate. Tension is growing everywhere in the area among the different religious and ethnic groups, even in those countries where there is no war, such as Lebanon. Media and television debates reveal an evident difficulty in creating dialogue, and images of destruction and death are fuelling fear and hatred among the population.

Due to the intransigence of the religious parties, organizing political transition to a more democratic system proved unsuccessful. Only in Tunis did the leaders of the Nahda party, fearing the prospect of facing a crisis similar to the one that had occurred in Egypt, withdrew from power and created a coalition Government which is trying, even amid great difficulties, to reach compromises and establish mutual understanding with the opposition.

As Daisaku Ikeda points out, the diplomacy of dialogue failed to reach its goals because the subjects involved ignored the reasons of the others⁶. When the other is not identified there is no sensitivity towards his/her feelings; this lack of sensitivity produces a sense of non-commitment.

The poor opinion of the other is the result of decades of mislead-

6 D.Ikeda, *Soka Education: A Buddhist Vision for Teachers, Students and Parents*, Soka Gakkai, Tokyo 2001, pp. 38.

ing information and sectarian education. After the 1995 Barcelona agreement many intellectuals, including the Algerian Muhammad Arkoun and the Syrian Adonis, had warned against the prejudices widespread in most western and eastern literatures⁷. Just to give some examples, in modern schools both in the MENA region and in Europe, the teaching of history concentrates on that of the respective country and generally ignores the history of the other countries or cultural communities. In the Western Media the term “Islam” recurs without making a distinction between the faith and the political meaning given by some extremist groups. On the other hand, the national wars to free the MENA countries from the colonial powers had produced a rigid conception of the nation State. School education, over the decades since the late fifties, was mostly based on a secular nationalist culture, concentrated on the resistance against the western colonial powers, while little attention was paid to world history and in particular to Nazism and the fight against it. This rigid vision of the western powers has contributed to create a negative opinion among the masses that had no possibilities to learn of complex western history.

The general cultural information transmitted through books, as well as museums, presents the history of the ancestors with attention to those events that celebrate the national cultural foundations. In Egypt, for instance, particular emphasis is given to the history of Egyptian civilization and Islam under the Omayad (680–750), the Abbasid caliphates (750–1258), the Fatimite and Mamlukes dynasties. Famous Egyptian intellectuals, such as Taha Husayn and ‘Abbàs Mahmūd al-‘Aqqād, at the beginning of the twentieth century, considered the Abbasid age an important model for cultural achievements and for the transmission of scientific knowledge from ancient Eastern civilization to the West⁸. Meanwhile the Salafite reformers in Egypt, as well as the

7 Adonis, *La Prière et l'Épée: essai sur la culture arabe*, (Prayer and the sword), ed. by J.Y. Masson and translated by A.W. Minkowsky, Mercure de France 1993; F.M. Corrao, “Promoting Dialogue to support a Human Rights culture”, in *Bulletin of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy*, Tokyo 2009, Vol. 25, pp. 121–133; “Humanity and Democracy” in *The Journal of Oriental Studies*, Tokyo December 2007, Vol. 46–2, pp. 174–189.

8 Sabri Hafiz, *The Genesis of Arabic Narrative Discourse*, Saqi Books, London, 1993; F.M. Corrao, *Le rivoluzioni Arabe. La transizione mediterranea*, Mondadori università, Milano 2011.

Wahhabites in Saudi Arabia, would concentrate mainly on the history of the Prophet's life, the first caliphs at Mecca (632–680) and then on to the Wahhabite reform of the 18th century.

Hence two problems emerge: a vision that splits the local from the general history and a conception of a national history unaware of the mutual interdependence with other events in a given area.

There is a third element that Richard Nisbett pointed out in his "Tao and Aristotle. Why Western and Eastern think different". The way these approach the study of history is diverse: eastern culture takes into account the environment, the age and the mentality, while the western analyses a peculiar phenomenon of a very specific period, maximum decades, and isolates it from its environment⁹.

Surveying the history of the Islamic cultural renaissance in the Middle East and Egypt subsequent to Napoleon's invasion, we observe that emphasis was given to the age of the great Islamic empires, as noted above. After the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate the Islamic Salafite reformers, including Hasan al-Banna (1906–49) and Sayyid Qutb (1906–66) together with their followers, inspired by the life of the prophet Muhammad chose it as a rigorous model for a better way of life¹⁰. The Muslim Brothers rejected the view of modernity based on modern western values.

The existence of different cultural perspectives within the same country shows that Islamic culture can be open to pluralism; the question today is whether or not the conservative religious ideologues leave any room for the secular thinkers. Over the centuries there has always been a clash between the supporters of the innovation and conservative defenders of the traditions. In the last few decades, Adonis has warned against the alliance between authoritarian regimes and the conservative religious class, attributing higher priority to religious codes than to the

9 R. Nisbett, *Tao and Aristotle. Why Western and Eastern think different*, Rizzoli 2007. The French historian Fernand Braudel shares the same opinion indicating this specific western approach as a limit that Historians should overcome, see F. Braudel, *Ecrits sur l'histoire*, Flammarion Paris, 1969, chap. 2.

10 A. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798–1939*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1962; R.P. Mitchell, *The Society of The Muslim Brothers*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1969.

happiness of the people, and paving the way to fundamentalism. The poet philosopher also expressed concern over the spread of religious schools and the repression of secular culture. He believes that this behaviour endangers peaceful coexistence among the different religious communities in the MENA area.

After the Arab revolutions the seeds of sectarian religious teachings and generally scant experience of political dialogue produced dramatic difficulties in communication. The spread of radical intolerance, among some conservative religious groups, and police repression led to the failure of the first democratically elected government. This was certainly due to a totally different perception in the reading of facts and events, in the understanding of democracy. The “Freedom and Justice” party once in power considered they had the right to rule without taking into account the opinion of the opposition; they dismissed the commission that had been elected to write the Constitution and created a new one made only with their representatives. The oppositions contested this undemocratic behaviour; the very existence of a plurality of mentalities and behaviours shows that the cultural influence in the formation of identity is crucial and evident. Bruce Hood, psychologist of development, affirms that the perception we have of ourselves is the result of our relation with the others¹¹. School programmes in an authoritarian regime do not train pupils to respect a different point of view, an opinion “other” than the official one. Adonis’s provocative declaration: “I am the other”, is considered to be a revolutionary innovation (in Arabic *ibda’a*), generally condemned by the conservative religious élite¹². In a globalized world it is dangerous to promote sectarian culture, it leads to religious clashes. Classical Islam, as conceived by the majority of the Muslims, has throughout most of its history been open to other cultures, entering into harmony with them, and promoting the spread of ancient knowledge. As for the Salafites, these attitudes and the later Caliphates’ innovations were not deemed good practices to follow. The Muslims believe Islam is the seal of religious prophecies, which generally means that Islam

11 B. Hood, *The Self Illusion: Why There is No “You” Inside Your Head*, Constable, London 2012.

12 F.M. Corrao, *Adonis. Nella pietra e nel vento*, ed. Mesogea Messina 1996; Adonis avec Houria Abdelouahed, *Le regard d’Orphée*, Fayard Paris 2009, pp. 97–8.

includes all the previous revelations, but for the radicals it means that it excludes them in the sense that these became obsolete. Radical movements have appeared since the very beginning of Islamic civilizations but had always been marginalized and fiercely opposed because they encroached on the harmony (in Arabic *fitna*) within the Islamic community.

Adonis warned against the rigid attitude of the conservative wing of the Salafites; the poet criticized their refusal of any external influence. The rigid conservative religious opposition, on the one hand, and the authoritarianism of the military regime, on the other, created formidable obstacles to policies of dialogue and mutual understanding. The short-lived experience of the peaceful movement, in the attempt to forge dialogue with the liberal opposition forces, has constituted an important step forward but it needed more training to have more stable prospects.

Daisaku Ikeda points out that human beings are united in a single living entity. This vision corresponds to the Buddhist teaching of the “dependent origination”, *pratītya-samutpāda* (engi in Japanese)¹³. Buddhist Humanism promotes a path to harmonize contradictory entities, and it is possible if one becomes aware of the fact that everything is ever-changing, nothing lasts for ever, and so each should build his/her inner strength on solid values. The major goal is to master one’s mind and learn how to respect the others¹⁴.

The famous Palestinian intellectual Edward Said presents a similar vision in his “Humanism and Democratic Criticism”, where he proposes a way toward a unified sphere of humanism. In light of the events of 9/11—pivotal for the timing of his work—Said focused the analysis on three core elements: the centrality of the individual (with his/her heterogeneity and equality in respect to the other), human history (continuously changing) and language (through which humans express themselves and shape history)¹⁵.

13 D. Ikeda, “An endless Horizon”, Conference held at the University of Shenzhen Guangdong 31 January 1993, in Ikeda. *A New Humanism*, (Un nuovo umanesimo, ed. Esperia, Milano, 2013), p. 188.

14 D. Ikeda, *Peace Proposal 2002*, pp. 16–18.

15 E. Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, Columbia Univ. Press, 2004; the book is the result of a compound work after his lectures at Columbia University between 2000 and 2003.

Said gave a definition of humanism—depicting it as a way of questioning what is reality and what is presented as packaged. Indeed, his analysis of humanism is meant to be in opposition to what he describes as packaged: a particular Western self-centredness—which became stronger with the tragic events following on the Cold War and 9/11—viewing the world in a biased way, so that we have a single interpretation of general values, i.e. of freedom.

Said believed that humanism should be studied everywhere, because human history is not homogeneous, but rather an endlessly changing and human product.

In this way, Said's historical humanism takes into account the identity of the individual, as heterogeneous and dynamic: on the one hand, leading toward a world based on inclusivity and diverse solutions, while, on the other hand, avoiding those negative models based on particularism and exceptionalism, such as nationalism and religious fanaticism. According to Said a phenomenon can be truly understood if all points of view are taken into account.

Said affirmed that the real meaning of “being a humanist” is to take on personal commitment (ijithad) toward the religious text and toward oneself. Reality is made up of dynamic and reciprocal influence between past and present. The single author—in his view—has a limited perspective, due to his own time and his own work. So that heterogeneity and, hence, multiplicity of interpretations are needed to proceed through historical humanism.

Said affirmed that the distinction between writer and intellectual no longer exists. Rather, they are one thanks to the speed of communication, the equal availability of electronic media and the multiplying reproduction of information. Nonetheless, the author argued that the various speed of communication is double-edged: it may prove the cause of distorted information, more easily spread and shared. He also feared that it could lead to the disappearance of the past—something from which we could learn. Furthermore, peaceful accord among intellectuals remains to be achieved: Eurocentrism and particularism still influence the intellectual field. For this reason, equality and peace go hand-in-hand: the two elements are closely related. Peace cannot exist without equality, so that the task of the intellectual is challenging and defeating silence

and distorted information.

To conclude it is still possible to create alternatives to the present system of violent oppositions. An urgent step is to cooperate in promoting a humanistic education focused on intercultural exchange in order to develop a more sensitive approach to other people, and with it respect.

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The paper focuses on the importance of education in promoting peace and dialogue. It takes into account some Buddhist principles relevant to such education, as explained by President Daisaku Ikeda in his 2013 Peace proposals and in some essays on Soka education. The paper examines the need to recognize the relations that link each one of us to the others, and the importance of respecting human dignity.

To illustrate the relevance of these principles, it offers some considerations on the events that occurred in Egypt after the failure of the peaceful revolution of January 25th 2011. The paper explores the elements that facilitated the spread of Nonviolence in non-democratic countries and the failure of the movement in the post revolutionary phase, and in particular, the reasons that led to the failure of any attempt to establish dialogue between the political party that won the election and the Tahrir square protest movement.

Furthermore, evidence will be presented showing that these difficulties are not due to Islamic culture but to internal and external pressures and a more general absence of an education inspiring sense of responsibility and respect for life. The opinions of important Arab intellectuals will be quoted to exemplify their understanding of the concept of mutual interdependence and the need for dialogue to build a more human society.

The present Middle Eastern crisis inspires us with the need to spread awareness of the deep interrelations that link human beings and establish an education that promotes a better knowledge of other cultures and respect for every individual's dignity.