

Revisiting the Intercultural Dialogue in the Light of a Culture of Peace¹

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Intercultural dialogue, it should be emphasised, attributes to itself among other purposes that of establishing as its predominant tendency the recourse to words, in order to exorcise the otherwise disastrous temptation of the recourse to arms (in circumstances of tension, conflict and war). And given that such dialogue is more solicited and urgently required than ever, the words involved in any exchange of commentaries and ideas must have meanings that have been sharpened and carefully reflected upon and hence delivered of any semantic imprecision or bundling that can be the source of so much misunderstanding and prejudice. For, as Albert Camus said, ‘to misname things is to add to the world’s misfortunes’. Consequently, to enable there to be more clarity and rigour in all inter-confessional or intercultural dialogue, it is imperative to set aside the banalities of deregulatory terminologies which are little more than catch-all expressions but which tend to persist, and to name things as nearly as possible to their nature and function. As Régis Debray pertinently noted (2007: 20 *trans.*): ‘The detection of difference, the calm exploration of areas of inter-lingual incomunicability or of false association, the bringing to light of each side’s preconceptions must indeed be a prior undertaking for any serious dialogue, not just as a footnote to it.’

Finding the right language for intercultural dialogue. The case of Islam

When applied to religions, doctrines and theories, the suffix ‘-ism’ mostly serves to provide no more than an identifying and conceptual (or ideological) reference. Another term or expression is often used to refer to the body of adherents to that religion or doctrine or the cultures or societies that embrace it. Hence the notion of ‘Christendom’ (Fr. *chrétienté*) contrasts with that of ‘Christianity’ (Fr. *christianisme*) to designate simply the collective body of Christian countries and peoples but does not take on any particular semantic connotation. However, such terms are capable of being distorted, whether intentionally or otherwise. Consider the unfortunate concept of ‘Islamism’, to which has been reserved an exceptionally particularist philological treatment, one that is even discriminatory (since a similar application is not made to other religions). Those who

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use this term declare or suggest that it represents one thing and the concept of 'Islam' another. The latter is taken to designate the world's third monotheistic religion along with its culture and civilization while the former refers to Islamic fundamentalism and extremism, etc. This difference, which some, even among the Arab and Muslim intelligentsia, strive to buttress and refine as being both a difference of degree and of nature, is nevertheless an innovation of only recent date (contemporary with the marked surge of politico-religious consciousness from the 1970s, that is, consequent upon the Arab defeat in June 1967, and even more so from the Iranian Revolution in 1978–79). Since then, a whole bunch of semantic correlations have spread about. Maintained and fostered often with great intention, they allow the terms 'Islamism' and 'Islamist' to be applied indistinctly to things as different and varied as the Iranian regime, the government of Turkey, the controversial headscarf, Pakistan's nuclear capability and so on, but also to hostage-takers, terrorists and those who place bombs. What a priceless offering this is to these latter to so provide them with an Islamic identity on a plate, even though they are moreover uniformly described as among those who fear neither God nor man, yet who would see themselves as among the 'righteous' and the 'doers of good' ... And this despite the fact that, for centuries in European eyes, as one should recall, the terms Mohammedanism, Islam and Islamism were all applied simply as synonyms or onomastic variations of one and the same reality. Voltaire, for example, in his *Essay on the Customs and Spirit of Nations*, spoke of 'Islamism', which he praised under this term without in any way distinguishing it from its other two synonyms. The same practice occurred with Orientalists, scholars and translators of the nineteenth century, as is demonstrated, for example, by the famous lecture of Ernest Renan, 'L'islamisme et la science', delivered at the Sorbonne in March 1883.

Well then, what appropriate terms and fitting concepts should one make use of in order to clearly enunciate a conceptual reality? In this case in point: 'Muslim extremism or fundamentalism' instead of 'Islamism'; 'fanatical Muslims, religious fundamentalists' and not 'Islamists'. All the more so in this latter case in that fundamentalism is the most widely shared aspect of all ideologies and doctrines, and because no one labels the extremists of the two other monotheistic religions, for example, as 'Judaists' or 'Christianists'. In this respect one can but be glad at reading, under the pen of the President of the 2001 United Nations Year for Dialogue among Civilizations, Giandomenico Picco: 'History does not kill. Religion does not rape women, the purity of blood does not destroy buildings [...]. Only individuals do those things.' Erasmus, the 'prince of the humanists', wrote in his admirable *Complaint of Peace* (1516): 'But as for Christ, what else did he teach and inculcate, but peace? He addressed those whom he loved, with the auspicious words of peace: *Peace be with you*, he repeatedly says; and prescribes this form of salutation, as alone worthy of the Christian character' (Erasmus 1917: *online source*). Which equally applies to the Prophet Mohammed and his religion, whose name Islam belongs to the same semantic family, that of *Salaam*: peace.

To maintain the semantic confusion between Islam and any fundamentalist ideology claiming to derive from it thus reduces the distinctive distance between these to less than a single step, a step which Western elites, not to mention various expressions of public opinion, do not hesitate consciously to cross without any precaution, particularly in time of crisis. Such is the case of a fair number of virulent polemicists, authors of inflammatory Islamophobic writings, whose capacity for causing damage to the cause of dialogue between religions and cultures should not be underestimated (Oriana Fallaci, Alexandre Del Valle, Alexandre Adler ...). Worse still, even some who are apparently ignorant of Arab and Islamic matters join in to shout (and write) high and loud their visceral hatred not only of 'Islamism' but also of Islam itself, as is the case of Maurice Dantec, Michel Houellebecq and many other writers less hyper-exposed to the media. Houellebecq's case is in itself alone very symptomatic. More than the fact that he is the son of an Islamic convert, more than that his novel *Platform* is marked by a declared visceral hatred towards Islam, it is rather the great retail

success that he has derived from his writing which creates the problem. There is room here for serious concern about the new tastes and predilections of European readers as for the current state of the market for books. Thus the novelist has his main character utter nauseating comments of the type: 'Each time that I heard that a Palestinian terrorist or a Palestinian child or a pregnant Palestinian woman had been shot dead in the Gaza Strip, I felt a thrill of enthusiasm [...].' And, as if to remove all uncertainty, the novelist himself declared in an interview that 'the most stupid religion is definitely Islam. When you read the Koran, you are just distraught ... distraught!'² He seems thus even to trump someone like Fallaci, whose polemic *Rage and Pride* abounds in defamatory and incendiary comments such as 'Muslims breed like rats'. In the feverish outbursts of this cabal, it is not a question of some or other Islamic configuration or manifestation, but of Islam in itself, that is, as an anhistoric essence, rigidly fixed and labelled *ad vitam aeternam*, as found in highly elaborated version in the works of the Orientalist Bernard Lewis, guru of the American neo-conservatives since 9/11 and originator in 1992 of the concept '*clash of civilizations*', a notion already appearing in a controversial article of 1990 which was very revelatory of Lewis's essentialist and fixist approach, framed within the conflicts and wars of the past. Its title was: 'The Roots of Muslim Rage'.³

Olivier Roy, a good specialist on Afghanistan, is correct in observing the little significance often accorded to the historical and geostrategic approach to Islam, as he points out, not without a measure of acerbity tinged with irony: 'The first victim is no doubt the geo-strategy of cultural understanding which, since the collapse of the USSR, has dominated clubs and coffee-houses, where all and sundry repeat their refrain about the nature of Islam, and where even the expert comes to spout the same banalities as his next-door neighbour. But, if the right to be wrong has long been recognized, it should not be forgotten also that there is no democracy without the right to stupidity' (Roy 2002: 210 *trans.*). Yet stupidity, in this form, is extremely harmful and destructive, as it is able to draw within its damaging ambit the whole Islamic culture as well as the regimes and states that are historically and constitutionally Islamic. To therefore revisit the whole lexicon of inter-cultural dialogue by submitting it to a conceptual critique is thus to fulfil one of the major conditions necessary for a true culture of peace, founded on an authentic dialogue between free and equal partners strongly linked by a dialectic of reciprocal knowledge and true and sincere recognition.

Hegemonism as a stumbling-block to peace

Hegemonism, by the fact of its military-economic and symbolic arsenal, can function and endure only through the subjugation and reduction to minority status of states and nations. In our world of today it presides over the nagging and multiform problem of dependency, which is the source of subjection and denial of self-esteem, or what Nietzsche called the deterioration of self-reference (*Selbstlosigkeit*). For, at close hand, dependency or what Kant called 'the state of tutelage' or of 'minority' is like indebtedness: the more of it you contract, the more your existence is constrained by the burdensome tendency to live the history of others at second-hand or by procuration! But, though possible in itself, this existence can only be led under the emblems of the artificial and the sterile, that is, by those who relegate themselves to the role of mere clients in an environment of a chronic lack of subjectivity and inspiration. So it is that the world is full of requiems for sorely wounded cultural identities.

Counter-productive and alienating, dependency has the inherent capacity to shut out the present and the future by debilitating the drive for liberty and the intrinsic energisers of development ... Dependency, which certain gurus of 'felicitous globalization' (after the manner of Alain Minc) think is just an old refrain or is no longer an issue, is on the contrary still very much to the forefront,

even though its mechanisms may be in the process of becoming more sophisticated and refined, though without losing any of their effectiveness and enduring force.

In the subordinate countries, there is a visible tendency for people to want to rid themselves of what they were and what they have, and this even before opening up to the Other! The Other which, itself, always comes adorned with its past, its present and its becoming. This highly damaging tendency is characteristic of all decadent and cowed societies that are satisfied with their lot; those whose batteries turn over only now-disengaged engines, cultivating the mournful belief that they have nothing to offer for the world's astonishment and enrichment. Concerning such a state of mind, Ibn Khaldûn made a general observation in striking terms: 'Once the source of energy runs dry, once the will declines and aspirations wither, light then disappears along with hope, and the living are commanded by the dead.'

But humanist philosophy can teach such subordinate nations that, beyond self-flagellation as beyond self-congratulation, there is still room for more lucidity and vigilance, and for the acquisition of a will to be and to be better. As it also teaches them that, even though they may have been subjugated by the current power relationships, that does not mean that they no longer have a valid point of view to present, nor a perspective to offer on how the knotty issues involving them came about, nor a right to redress, to deliverance or quite simply to a full emergence on their own terms.

Under the banner of so-called universalism, how many ideological derivatives in the West remain, in the final analysis, organically bound to their own zone of culture and thought! In the light of this, a truly global and plural thought needs to commit to the elaboration of a multi-polar, partnership-based and inter-communicating universality, the only one which is likely to prove viable, convivial and capable of flourishing. Otherwise the dominant identity, culture and philosophy will be that of the dominant power, with the immense majority of the world's population condemned to lose their soul beneath its weight and be reduced to hugging the walls of an unproductive and debasing dependency.

Another quirk of any unipolar hegemonism is to confront us with the stark dilemma of choosing between security and human rights, on the basis that our world is more and more a world of sound and fury, and hence highly resistant to any control or spread of peace.

Considering this dilemma from the standpoint of the past (which, moreover, never seems to recede completely) may lead us to observe that it is only a real dilemma for despotic politico-economic systems and regimes, which resolved (or more correctly dissolved) this dilemma by elevating *manu militari* the State and its ruling casts over and above the whole society and its rights, and whose security was maintained by police forces and surveillance and intelligence agencies.

However, examining the same question from the present standpoint, as measured by the humanist and democratic achievements and gains that have been made, is to realise the falseness of the dilemma in question. Consciously perceived in this way, it lays down as a foundation principle the relationships of inclusiveness and causal reciprocity between global security (for all) and human rights. It is in virtue of this principle that the matter must be analysed in the present context, in which globalisation is a major happening which, through the manifold aspects of its mechanisms and processes, as well as through the perverse effects generated by all-out liberalisation and a market economy directed only towards profit, engenders for societies and even states as a whole risks of insecurity and the violation of human rights.

Towards a humanised globalisation and a 'perpetual peace'

Given the current state of things and the new issues and challenges facing the world, our hypothesis is that only a humanist philosophy of proximity with a concern for the values and principles of

justice, well-being and security of bodies both social and individual will be capable of detecting and bringing to knowledge and ethical consciousness the whole variety of slippages and deviations from these principles, particularly those increasingly brought about by the current globalisation: the systematic 'financialisation' of the economy which is becoming entirely embedded within a virtual world disconnected from the real economy and the everyday lives of people; the perversion of liberal capitalism's initial vocation, turning it from one of liberating energies and giving dynamism to business to one of prospering through voracious pursuit of self-interest, dumping, contempt for rules of fair practice and cynicism; the privatisation of profit and the socialisation of risk; the devaluation of democracy in its dual politico-economic articulation; a plethora of zones and hotbeds where poverty-spreading pathogens dwell and thrive, widening more and more the gaps of inequality separating classes and nations and injurious to any culture of peace in the world.

To be sure, the market, they say, is a good servant. But it is also a bad master. It is therefore a matter for those who govern and take decisions – as a categorical imperative – to submit the market to regulation and to the discipline of ethical and human values. To reply positively to this imperative is to contribute towards the creation of constructive synergies for well-being, positive human relationships and hence peace.

Furthermore, a genuine desire for majority status and a will to be fully emancipated and master of their own destiny and possessor of their own wealth is currently coming to expression and effect in the countries of Latin America, the southern Mediterranean region and elsewhere, as if in response to the Enlightenment motto proclaimed by Kant: '*Sapere aude!* Have the courage to use your *own* understanding.'⁴ We now know more than ever that any world order, which must be the business of all, can only be truly realised and see the light of day if it arises from a concerted and rational planet-wide policy, just as it can attain a maximum adhesion only if it is founded on a rigorous respect for the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, along with the implementation of a dynamic of justice and peace on a world scale and a taking into consideration of national and regional entities that draw their legitimacy from the depth of their historical and cultural identity. For a standardised world order that crushes differences and specificities cannot endure once it has been erected upon dissymmetrical and truncated power relationships and it will end up becoming aligned with a single root source which destroys all about it.⁵

In the perspective of a culture of peace that is both critical and constructive, to humanise the current globalisation process is to temper the teachings of the all-encompassing doctrine of IT, marketing and management with an instruction that is opened out to encompass the humanities, philosophies, the arts and religious and secular ethics; humanising globalisation also means replacing the implacable laws of the market, of deeply-ingrained competitiveness and of 'killer capitalism' (this latter the origin of the financial crisis of 2008–2009) with those of a world economy marked by solidarity and a human face. It is in these conditions, among others, that globalisation will be able to bring about fundamental action on the necessary parameters of co-development and fair trade, and as a result promote the peace and well-being of nations and peoples and provide a real chance for a just, balanced and united dialogue between civilizations and cultures.

If the political and economic parties and players throughout the world were to recognise their need for a strong source of thought and proposition, they could not do better in broad measure than to have recourse to those members of that rigorous elite, those partisans of humanist ethics and culture that are the world's philosophers and thinkers. In the present world situation, torn as it is by conflicts and tragedy, these would be the ones most apt to promote, by drawing them into full view, the propositions and indicators for great changes in pursuit of justice and well-being towards which humans have long aspired and with which they identify the sense of their existence.

Humanist philosophers and researchers would thus be in a position to take the lead by elaborating for the future new plans and agreements of mutual understanding and active co-operation between the civilizations. Samuel Huntington (2003: 37) at least had the honesty to write: 'The Cold War model of world politics was useful and relevant for forty years but became obsolete in the late 1980s, and at some point the civilizational paradigm will suffer a same fate.' And this moment, we believe, is already upon us, at least in the form of initiatory premises and first steps which, in countries both of the South and the North, are beginning slowly but surely to shape and extend powers and hopes which may have the capacity to counter the dangers that threaten the peace and lives of people on earth. And, to apply the terminology of Kant (author of *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, which was a source of inspiration for the former League of Nations) who tried to effect a definitive separation between, on the one hand, a politics in the service of ideals and values and human well-being, and on the other, a politics which is simply the pursuit of war by other means, let us affirm that the initiation of work towards finding the conditions propitious for a peace alliance (*foedus pacificum*) and not a peace treaty (*pactum pacis*) which offers nothing else than a thin coating of peace, is henceforth 'a categorical imperative' which should as such be inscribed in all public and private institutions as in all individual consciences and behaviours.

This culture of 'perpetual peace' (in the Kantian sense of this concept), far from any ecumenical verbiage and conceptual fetishisation, is in the process of creating throughout the world efficient safeguards in the form of regulations, conventions, accords and so on, and is engaging a dynamic of 'communicative action' (Jürgen Habermas) which will be capable of overcoming the perils represented by the will to power, the deficits of knowledge and recognition, and all self-involved detachment and intolerance.

We inhabitants of earth, as the wise constantly remind us, are all passengers on the same ocean liner. Any failure affecting one of its components exposes the whole ship to dangers of capsizing and shipwreck. The compass for steering it in the right direction must be the principle of co-development and fair exchange, both firmly inscribed for the long term, and, with the ongoing health of the earth and the environment in mind, a form of growth that is 'green' and an economy of solidarity on a world scale. Such are the yeasts that will enliven a universal peace that is not a cold one (after the manner of the Cold War), but one that is warm and convivial, infused with a generous and fraternal culture, creative of both wealth and an ethic of non-violence and mutual sharing.

Promoting true inter-cultural dialogue (true because it is just and fair); working for the re-establishment of a culture of perpetual peace that nurtures the full development of individual persons and the progress of peoples and their emancipation: these are two major and salutary tasks with which UNESCO will become more engaged, empowered by its institutional advantages and its initiatory and educative functions, as well as by the contributions of men and women of good will throughout the world, those tireless and devoted labourers for peace who, in the face of all manner of obstacles and the efforts of those who would bury that peace, strive to ensure that the values and levers of universal harmony are firmly anchored in the life of people and the way of the world. It is fitting to conclude with the sublime recommendation of Martin Luther King, the illustrious role-model of civil peace and social equality who lived in his very flesh and sensitivity the agonies of racial discrimination and the subjection of coloured people: 'We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools.'

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. Address presented before the Executive Council of UNESCO, 11 October 2010, as part of a session devoted to 'Intercultural Dialogue in 2010: revisiting policies from the perspective of a culture of peace'.
2. See his novel *Plateforme* (2001, Eng. trans. *Platform* 2002) and the interview with the author in *Lire*, September 2001.
3. Cf. Lewis (1990, 2002, 1976), notably 'The Return of Islam' (838–1164) and 'What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East' (1165–1304).
4. It is worth reading the whole of Kant's paragraph from *What is Enlightenment?* in which this motto is included (1970: 54) 'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of the Enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude* (Dare to know!). Have the courage to use your own understanding!'
5. The worst thing for any culture, as everyone knows, wrote Régis Debray (2007: 56 *trans.*) is to remain singular [...]. This could well be the fate today of a Euro-American culture, claiming to speak for the whole of the West, which is too imbued with its own formulas to be able to count up to two, and even less up to three. In the long run, its weakness may well reside in the very source of its strength.

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