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INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE: BETWEEN THEORY & PRACTICE

This paper aims at shedding some light on the problematic issue of intercultural dialogue. It puts a special focus on the discrepancy that often exists between theory and practice insofar as this question is concerned. For it is quite noticeable that there is a very wide gap between what one finds in theoretical texts or rational political discourses and what one finds in reality, as I am going to illustrate very soon.

Given that we are mostly concerned with the differences as well as the possible similarities and dialogue between our Eastern world – especially our Arabo-Islamic civilization – and the Western one, much attention is paid here to the consideration and the juxtaposition of some basic precepts or principles that constitute the conceptual background of each of these two distinct worlds or civilizations. I will thus start by citing and analyzing briefly some verses from the Quran and some Ahadiths from the Sunnah,¹ since the latter (I mean both the Quran and Sunnah) are the basic sources that shape the theoretical framework within which all Muslims are supposed to act and react. Indeed, most Muslims who engage in discussions about dialogue, including thinkers, scholars and politicians, rely on these sources which tacitly stand as a sort of constitution to the whole Islamic nation. Afterwards, the emphasis will shift to the examination of some important Western texts or discourses that equally reveal the Westerners' attitude towards the question of dialogue with their cultural Others. One of these essential texts is Europe's 'The White Book on Intercultural Dialogue,' which was prepared by the European Union as part of its celebration of the year 2008 as the 'European Year of Intercultural Dialogue.'²

¹ Ahadiths (singular of the word 'Hadith' in Arabic), means the saying(s) of Prophet Muhammad. The Sunnah includes both these sayings and the living habits of this Prophet.

² *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Pub_White_Paper/White%20Paper_final_revised_EN.pdf

Some references will also be made to the Americans' vision of inter-cultural dialogue. President Obama's recent speech in a Cairo university will certainly serve as an extremely important discourse that well illustrates what the Americans generally and theoretically believe their relations with Arabs and Muslims should be.

After contrasting the theoretical/ideological positions of both sides, we shall proceed to answer the following central question: To what extent are all these ideas and principles we find in texts and discourses practised in real life? As is always the case in matters that concern the relation between theory and practice, we will find that the real socio-political scene of the relations between the West and the 'Rest', in Huntington's terms, is a far cry from those principled claims of both religious texts and political or ideological discourses.

If we now start from the Islamic conception and perception of cultural dialogue, we will notice that both religious and political or cultural texts stress the importance of peaceful and friendly relations between not only Muslims and non-Muslims but also among all the peoples of the world. As a matter of fact, the Holy Quran advocates quite unambiguously the following: "O mankind! We created You from a single (pair) of male and females, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other" (XLIX, 13).³ Here we can see clearly that the address concerns all humankind and not only Muslims or believers. This Quranic verse also reveals that even if God has deliberately created all people in the form of different nations and diverse tribes, He recommends that they must do their best to know each other. Indeed these close interaction and peaceful cross-cultural communication between different peoples and nations are so paramount that they seem to be at the heart of the reason behind God's creation of mankind, according to the preceding verse.

In line with this, several Islamic scholars and intellectuals confirm that Islam is basically a peaceful religion that strictly prohibits any aggression or blind vindictive reactions against one's cultural Others. Some of them insist that the word 'Islam' itself suggests 'peace' and mutual understanding. In Arabic language, the word Islam is thought to be derived from the term 'peace' (Assalam). The Holy Quran thus invites all people and not just Muslims to embrace Islam and peace and to avoid the evil path of Satan. "O ye who believe! Enter into Islam whole-heartedly; and follow not the footsteps of the Evil One..." (II, 208). This verse literally equates Islam with peace; the opposite is any evil or devilish deed that may spoil or jeopardize this divinely recommended condition. It is also worth mentioning that Assalam (ie peace) is one of Allah's names; and in authentic Islam all Muslims are required to greet each other as well as any person by saying: Assalam Alaykum (ie 'peace

³ *The Glorious Kuran*, Trans. Abdallah Yousuf Ali, (Beyrouth: Dar Alkikr, 1934). All references to this Book are made directly in the text after the quoted verses.

be upon you', literally). In one Hadith, the Prophet Mohammad said: "Say Assalam to those whom you know and those whom you don't know." In another Hadith he said: 'Be outspoken in saying Assalam to all people.' This statement can even be interpreted as meaning not just peace in words but peace in deeds and practical human relations. And that is why most defenders of Islam are shocked by the repeated allegations and accusations that consider Islam as a religion of hatred, terrorism and wars. They are quick to point out that Islam never sanctions war or aggression except when these come in the form of necessary retaliation or self-defence. The Quran states: "If then any one transgresses the Prohibition against you, transgress ye likewise against him" (II, 194). In the same Surah we find another verse that expresses the same meaning: "Fight in the cause of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God loveth not transgressors" (II, 190). As a matter of fact, even in the middle of war, if the enemy desires peace, Moslems are required to realize this peace: "But if the enemy incline towards peace, do thou (also) incline towards peace and trust in God" (VIII, 61). Moslems are also prohibited from imposing their religion on other peoples or nations by force because, as one verse makes clear, "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (II, 256). And to end these citations from the Quran, I would like to add the following two quotations that highlight strongly the fact that Islam is a religion of dialogue rather than war. In one verse Allah specifies how dialogue should be conducted with the peoples of other religions by saying: "Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious." (XVI, 125). Another verse expresses nearly the same meaning in different words by stating: "And dispute ye not With the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation)" (XXIX, 46).

So from all the preceding citations and explanations one can see clearly how Islam attempts to promote dialogue and to foster friendly relations and mutual understanding not only among Muslims but between the latter and all other peoples of different cultures, religions or civilizations.

In contrast with this Islamic vision of dialogue and cross-cultural relations, we notice that the West's vision (I mean the vision of both Europeans and Americans) is often marked by a certain sense of self-centredness and cultural arrogance vis-à-vis non-Westerners. This idea can be illustrated through a brief reference to a couple of Western texts from different periods and discursive genres. For example, in his famous 17th c geographic book entitled *Atlas or a Geographicke Description of the World* (1636), HONDIUS Mercator writes:

Here (Europe) wee have the right of Lawes, the dignity of the Christian Religion, the forces of Armes (...) Moreover, Europe manageth all Arts and Sciences with such dexterity, that for the invention of manie things shee may be truely called a Mother (...) she hath (...) all manner of learning, whereas other Countries are all of them, overspread with Barbarisme.

In an 18th c poem entitled 'The Progress of Refinement' (1783), Henry J. Pye wrote:

May Europe's race the generous toil pursue,
And Truth's broad mirror spread to every view;
Awake to Reason's voice the savage mind,
Check Error's force, and civilize mankind.⁴

These lines are highly reminiscent of Rudyard Kipling's famous poem 'The White Man's Burden' (1889). In both poems, Europe is seen as the locus of light or reason and the centre of civilization, whereas all other parts of the world are barbaric margins that need to be enlightened and civilized by the rational Westerners.

In his famous book, *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996), Samuel Huntington speaks of the West as a unique world that must unite to preserve its uniqueness and defend itself against its barbaric cultural Others. He thus goes on to expound his theory of the West and the Rest, specifying the Muslim world as the most dangerous enemy of the West after the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union.⁵

From the discourses of these three representative texts, one can remark how the West's vision is immensely ethnocentric and antagonistic towards 'the Rest', as Huntington puts it. It was such vision that actually led to many aggressions against the Muslim world ever-since the Crusades up to the recent European colonization of most parts of the world as well as the present American invasion of some Islamic countries like Iraq and Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that Westerners do not have ideals or programmes that aim, in one way or another, to serve and promote inter-cultural dialogue, not only inside the West itself but also between this latter and its cultural Others; to clarify this point, I shall now cite and comment briefly on a number of passages from two important and very recent Western texts—namely, Europe's 'White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue' and President Obama's speech to the Muslim world from the University of Cairo.

As is well-known, the year 2008 was considered in Europe as 'The European year of Inter-cultural Dialogue.' As part of its contribution to this special Year, the council of Europe advanced 'The White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue', which is a sort of general roadmap that seeks to set the foundations of a fruitful inter-cultural dialogue. This paper has defined the concept of inter-cultural dialogue:

⁴ Quoted in *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Robert Young (London, New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 33.

⁵ Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (London, New York: Touchstone Books, 1996) 33.

as an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect. It operates at all levels—within societies, between the societies of Europe and between Europe and the wider world.⁶

But even if this 'White Paper' states that it also concerns the relations between Europe and the rest of the world, it is worth noting that its main focus is the cross-cultural communication within and between European societies. As a matter of fact, even the broader framework in which this Paper is conceptualized goes under the suggestive name or motto of 'European Year of Intercultural Dialogue', rather than, for example, 'International Year of Intercultural Dialogue.'

While this fact may be interpreted as yet another proof of Europe's self-centredness, one can conversely argue that it seems quite normal that Europeans should be concerned first with establishing dialogue locally within and between their communities and societies before thinking about broadening the scope of this dialogue to other neighbouring countries and all the nations of the world. This policy or strategy goes hand in hand with Europe's pragmatism as well as its practicality in achieving concrete results like that of creating the European Union itself. For if they just keep on speaking and raising the motto of dialogue of civilizations or dialogue of religions etc, as we Arabs and Muslims do, perhaps nothing tangible can be realized.

As the case of establishing and later widening the European Union attests, Europeans are more capable of instituting and implementing the concept of Intercultural dialogue, at least locally, thanks to a number of reasons like the following:

First, the notion of inter-cultural dialogue is easily understandable and practicable in the context of some essential values that are already practised and highly respected in Europe and the West in general. These values are "respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law,"⁷ and all these are important conditions which we can hardly find in most non-Western countries, especially our Arabo-Islamic world!

Second, Europe's motto of intercultural dialogue is not vaguely conceived of as a general principle that addresses everybody and nobody at the same time. It is rather a plan of action that is addressed to concrete individuals and institutions, as the following extract indicates:

The White Paper is addressed to policy-makers and administrators, to educators and the media, and to civil-society organizations, including migrant and religious communities, youth organizations and the social partners.⁸

⁶ *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, 11-12. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/intercultural/Source/Pub_White_Paper/White%20Paper_final_revised_EN.pdf

⁷ *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, 19.

⁸ *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, 8.

Third, it can be generally stated that Westerners have a sharper awareness about the necessity of intercultural dialogue than their non-Western counterparts, even if it is the latter who are often the victims of the lack of such dialogue. If we take the example of the Arabs and Moslems, we actually notice that they are unable to have any significant dialogue even among themselves; so how can they have it with their cultural Others?

I said the Europeans' awareness is sharper because their approach to intercultural dialogue is not emotional or idealistic but rather founded on a scientific study and a rational consideration of the huge political, technological and socio-cultural transformations our globe is witnessing. One of the passages of 'The White Paper' reads:

In recent decades, cultural diversification has gained momentum. Europe has attracted migrants in search of a better life and asylum-seekers from across the world. Globalisation has compressed space and time on a scale that is unprecedented. The revolutions in telecommunications and the media- particularly through the emergence of new communications services like the Internet - have rendered national cultural systems increasingly porous. The development of transport and tourism has brought more people than ever into face-to-face contact, engendering more and more opportunities for intercultural dialogue. In this situation, pluralism, tolerance and broadmindedness are more important than ever.... Only dialogue allows people to live in unity in diversity.⁹

If we now proceed from this quotation to President Obama's Cairo speech, we can see that at least theoretically - or rather in appearance - it seems to be quite good and rational as it invites all Arabs and Muslims to start a new page that will inaugurate an era of peaceful and friendly relations between them and Americans. Obama makes this clear from the outset as he states that:

I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles - principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.¹⁰

Yet even if Obama's intention with regards to this question of intercultural dialogue with Muslims is good and quite reasonable, many people in the Islamic world strongly doubt that such discourse will bring about any significant change. This is because America is still waging its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it is still threatening other Islamic countries like Syria and Iran. And though America conceives of these wars in terms of its so-called 'war on terror' after the unfortunate events of 11 September 2001, most Arabs and Muslims consider them rather as colonial campaigns whereby America

⁹ *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, 13.

¹⁰ Barak Obama, Cairo Speech, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?_r=1

is seeking to impose its imperialism and serve its economic and geopolitical interests.

It is also noticeable that even if Obama's discourse is generally balanced and rational in the sense that it takes into account the troubled past history of the West's relations with the Muslims as well as the current drastic developments on the international scene, it is not quite free of a certain sense of superiority and "cultural arrogance."¹¹ This can be illustrated by a statement like the following:

We meet at a time of tension between the United States and Muslims around the world – tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond any current policy debate. The relationship between Islam and the West includes centuries of co-existence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars. More recently, tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations. Moreover, the sweeping change brought by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam.¹²

Though Obama is apparently presenting here an objective critical overview of the West's relations with the Islamic world, the last sentences seem to implicitly blame Muslims for their helplessness and inability to cope with "the sweeping changes brought by modernity and globalization." Such a view just confirms America's self-image as a superpower, but it fails to see that globalization can be itself regarded as Americanization or, in other words, America's strategy to impose its imperialism and cultural hegemony. So it can be seen that even while Obama is calling for dialogue and peaceful intercultural relations with Muslims, he still tends to disregard the image and reality of America as a superpower that is not so much interested in any fruitful dialogue as in the service of its self-interests.

Thus, with regards to the practical side of the question of intercultural dialogue, it must be noted that up till now very little has been achieved, especially insofar as the relation between the West and the Moslem world is concerned. The reasons for this lack of fruitful dialogue are numerous and the following ones are among the most important:

1. The West's self-centredness or ethnocentrism has engendered a sort of superiority complex on the part of the West and an inferiority complex on the part of the Rest.
2. This situation has led to a Western cultural and political hegemony wherein unequal level of development has engendered unequal power relations.

¹¹ M. Elmanjra, "Cultural Diversity: Key to Survival in the Future", *Revue de la Faculté des Lettres, Oujda*, N° 5, 1995, 10.

¹² Barack Obama, Cairo Speech, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?_r=1

3. Thus we have unequal interlocutors: one weak and the other very powerful. This makes dialogue almost impossible because the powerful wants just to dictate and the weak 'partner' must obey.

4. The emergence of globalization has further aggravated the situation because it has added to the West's cultural and political power and hegemony over its Others.

5. The spread of such phenomena as terrorism, Islamophobia etc has also contributed to the difficulty of dialogue.

In conclusion, it can be reiterated that even if intercultural dialogue is theoretically seen as something urgent and highly recommended, it still seems out of reach and hardly realizable in practice.

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