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A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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**INTERRELIGIOUS AND  
INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN  
THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA DURING  
A PERIOD OF GLOBALIZATION**

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*Tarek Mitri*

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The conflicts in which the Mediterranean has often been embroiled have not prevented constant contacts and exchanges between its different populations. In the new North-South configuration, it is a place where new equilibria are gradually emerging in the wake of the collapse of the bipolar order.

On almost all its shores, at a time of globalization, there is a passionate desire for group allegiance, identity and 'roots' which at times resembles a resurgent tribalism or rather neotribalism, encouraging withdrawal into one's own specific cultural identity and producing anything from 'ghettoization' and its attendant xenophobia to social exclusion and racism. Fiercely resistant to globalization and cultural 'uniformization', neotribalism is obliged to target people rather than systems, effects rather than causes. It is a manifestation of rejection and offers no alternative solutions. This inability often nurtures an ideology of resignation which regards globalization as a fatality, an irreversible process governed by hidden forces and endowed with an almost magical power.

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Somewhere between the fine words advocating internationalism, stressing interdependence and playing down power relations and those advocating particularism, stressing a specific cultural identity and focusing attention on frontiers, interreligious and intercultural Mediterranean dialogue, whether seen as Euro-Arab or Islamic-Christian, is seeking a new paradigm which will make the existing situation intelligible and give hope and a sense of purpose to those men and women who wish to work together and think through their common future.

Education, which in all its forms supports and facilitates this dialogue, is thus grappling with the questions that it throws up. We shall address some of these questions.

## **Globalization, homogenization and difference**

Globalization is a multi-faceted process of technical, economic, social and cultural transformation that upsets the internal equilibria of regions and individual nations.

This process strengthens a complex system of tightly woven interdependent relations in which networks are replacing territories and the State is simply a vast legal, bureaucratic and financial engineering system working to improve economic performance and commercial competitiveness. The State is decreasingly the political expression of the public interest. Governments are said to have become too small to deal with major problems and too big to deal with minor ones.<sup>1</sup>

The globalization of the economy and communication is said to herald, in some sense, the death of politics. Whilst economic logic urges 'globalization', interdependence and regional integration, political logic is leading towards the fragmentation of the State. The process does not involve a decline in nationalist feelings. It has to be acknowledged that the world market and the universal *homo economicus* do not dispel ethnic particularism, whether within nations or at the supranational level.<sup>2</sup>

The paradox of globalization, with the development of the consumer society and the global entertainment industry, is that in homogenizing and standardizing it makes the need for distinction and recognition more acute. The more individuals—and peoples—are alike, the more they seek to emphasize their differences. The smaller the actual differences, the more their importance is exaggerated. It seems that to deny one's resemblance to another is the key to remembering a long forgotten difference.

Thus, the first task of any fruitful dialogue would be to be more aware of the tendency to over-emphasize differences between oneself and the other person. The views of communities in Bosnia and Lebanon, to name only two conflict-ridden countries, of themselves and their differences with the other community are an illustration of this. The over-emphasis of the Islamic origins of Muslims in Europe after having long played them down is another example.

## **Religious pluralism and**

## the organization of diversity

An essentialist approach, aggravated by the reductionist sensationalism of the media, amplifies the differences between Europe and the Arab-Muslim world. Islamism, which claims that Islam is 'under threat', is seen as evidence of the threat posed by Islam itself.

The 'culture' of Islam would explain to a large extent the distinctiveness of the Middle East with regard to democracy and human rights.<sup>3</sup> Islam is said to have created conditions likely to prevent Muslim countries from gaining access to democracy and to condemn them to a perpetual conflict with the Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

It is true that extreme doctrines from Islamic fundamentalists or rather interpretations of the scriptures impervious to any idea of political participation or the sovereignty of the people, not to mention actions which provoke strong security measures—sometimes justified but often excessive—make dialogue difficult.

But the force of the fundamentalist message has to be recognized. It is based, in Muslim countries, on a denunciation of genuine grievances and pleads the cause of the oppressed and victims of despotism. Its opposition to the increasing trivialization of life is a call for a return to basic values. It seeks the promise of utopia in a world suffering increasingly from loss of meaning and amnesia. In European countries, it fulfils a need for self-assertion when confronted by the difficult choice, whether real or imagined, between marginality and the loss of identity.

The basic question, beyond Islamism and the fears to which it can give rise, remains that of a model of society in which pluralism is accommodated by reconciling the principle of citizenship and civic and political equality with that of the right to be different.

Nowadays, heightened pressure from the Islamic communities living in secularized European societies in the throes of cultural and social homogenization is a problem to which neither of the two approaches—unitary and community-based or, on the other hand, unifying—have yet provided a satisfactory solution.

But it should be remembered that cultural and religious plurality does not mean the same thing on the two shores of the Mediterranean. It would be dangerous, indeed unjust, to equate them and see a symmetrical relationship between a majority/majorities and a minority/minorities or to require reciprocity between the Muslim Umma (community) and the 'Christian' West. An ancient legacy of religious plurality shaped over centuries by an all-embracing culture and a feeling of national identity, cannot be compared to a situation caused by contemporary migrations and characterized by economic inequalities and ethnocultural differences.

## Reaffirming citizenship

Dialogue not only between the two shores of the Mediterranean but also among the peoples that live on each shore will not get underway unless the idea of citizenship is

reaffirmed, perhaps rehabilitated. For citizenship remains the basis for free encounters among individuals who although they have been influenced by their own culture, religion and nationality cannot be reduced to the roles that are assigned to them either by market forces or by neotribalism. Individual men and women should not be seen solely in terms of their needs and capacities as consumers but nor should they be subjected to the—often fictitious—interests of one community defined in terms of its opposition to others.

The modernization of citizenship, which is at once a necessary condition for dialogue and its outcome, would offer a basis for exchanges of views within society, making social acceptance possible without needing to sacrifice one's identity. But a question mark continues to hang over the possibility of a secular or simply non-religious basis for citizenship in the Mediterranean area.

### **Ties to the past**

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue must inevitably deal with the many problems involved in the Mediterranean peoples' links with their past. Arabs are still described as a people of memory 'drawing their future from the past',<sup>5</sup> and Europeans, faced with the spread of 'post-modern' culture, are said to have a tendency to hark back to their past more often.<sup>6</sup> But, paradoxically, as we have already seen, we are witnessing at the same time the loss of cultural identity and amnesia caused by the consumer economy, a television culture and the Americanization of young people's life-styles. Given this dual phenomenon some fear that, instead of combining the best of both worlds, we face the prospect of having the worst of both worlds, i.e. a culturally homogeneous world in which people meet their need to feel part of a community by expressing hostility towards their neighbours.<sup>7</sup>

When this kind of situation develops, history is neither an ancestral memory nor a collective tradition. It is what is mediated by contemporary education and communication. Hatred is inculcated as much by education in the broad sense as by memory. It is more often stirred up by radio broadcasts, articles in the press and television programmes than inherited from past conflicts. After all, if the past does not meet the needs of the present, another one can always be invented.<sup>8</sup>

It is therefore vital to distinguish the real effect of historic events from their use and abuse in political discourse for the purpose of legitimizing power, mobilizing a community and justifying recourse to violence. The effectiveness of using group identity to mobilize a community is not determined so much by atavistic forces as by political strategies applied for the purpose of seizing or holding on to power. It was not ancestral hatred that caused the war in Bosnia (or the sectarian conflicts in Lebanon). It was the war that created hatred.<sup>9</sup>

### **Rethinking progress**

The ideology of globalization allows it to be assumed that access to development and modernity is still dependent on access to technology, and it fails to draw suffi-

cient attention to the fact that access to technology is often barred in order to protect markets and positions of power.

The history of technology is, at best, a history of ambivalence. There is no need to repeat that technology now possesses the most monstrous potentialities that can possibly be imagined.

Discussion of the progress of human activity and its final goal is, again, at the heart of any dialogue between different religions and cultures. It sometimes uses the arguments exchanged throughout the Arab-Muslim world in the twentieth century. But that debate was partly conducted in terms of the duality of endogenous and exogenous influences, whereas today there is no society that can escape the grasp of 'technopoly',<sup>10</sup> subjecting cultural life to the supremacy of technology.

In fact, globalization imposes its own agenda on us, while the rejection of this process, passionately and perhaps clumsily, proposes another. Dialogue between different religions and cultures is therefore more than ever obliged to tread the narrow path that will lead to a place where an authentically pluralistic civilization has freedom to develop.

## Notes

1. According to the often-cited formula of Daniel Bell.
2. Jacques Rupnik, *Le réveil des nationalismes* [The awakening of nationalisms]. In: Jacques Rupnik, ed., *Le déchirement des nations*, Paris, Seuil, 1995, p. 17.
3. John Waterbury, *Une démocratie sans démocrates? Le potentiel de libéralisation politique au Moyen-Orient* [Democracy without democrats? The potential for political freedom in the Middle East]. In: Ghassan Salamé, ed., *Démocraties sans démocrates: politiques d'ouverture dans le monde arabe et islamique*, Paris, Fayard, 1994, p. 94–128.
4. Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs McWorld*, New York, Times Books, Random House, 1995, p. 208.
5. Expression coined by Jacques Berque.
6. It suffices to mention by way of illustration the various 'commemorations' last year of the preaching of the First Crusade and the more recent controversy in France over the baptism of Clovis.
7. Rupnik, *op. cit.*, p. 265.
8. Eric Hobsbawm, A new threat to history, *The New York review of books* (New York), 16 December 1993, p. 62.
9. J. Rupnik, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
10. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: the surrender of culture to technology*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, p. 52.