

ATMAN ENCOUNTER 2005

“Dialogue among cultures and Religions”

A Dialogue among Cultures and Religions calls for a space for common values and for education to reflect these values. Delegates put the accent more on economic inequality and less on cultural differences.

The principle of citizenship as an integrating, non-exclusive concept; the importance of education and of common values within teaching; the emphasis on economic rifts rather than on cultural clashes...all these, and other questions, made up the key areas of debate in the Atman Foundation’s “Dialogue among Cultures and Religions,” held in Madrid on 28 October 2005.

First Session: Religions and Governments

Mehmet Aydin, Turkish Minister of State for Religious Affairs

“There are many people, not only in Turkey but also in other Muslim countries, who have good arguments in favour of establishing not a religious democracy but a secular democracy inspired by religious and cultural discourses.”

Felipe Gonzalez, Former President of the Spanish government

“We have to make an effort to recover a respect for international law and international rules [...]. The lack of respect for international law, the questioning of international law, is causing international disorder, which, in my opinion, is extremely dangerous.”

Miguel Angel Moratinos, Spanish Minister for Foreign Affairs

“The Alliance of Civilizations” aims to provide concrete proposals and projects that don't just end up as an exchange of words and good intentions, but which oblige, ultimately, states and members of the Alliance to adopt specific social measures and commitments in the fields of education and culture.”

Jean Marie Lustiger, Cardinal and Archbishop Emeritus of Paris

“It has to be said that it isn't just the strong, independent, free and critical personalities who have to start dialogue. No. Peoples and public opinion

have to dialogue too because it is these that are moulded by the injuries of the past and by history.”

Jose Maria Ridaó, Spanish Ambassador at UNESCO

“I think that what we should be looking for at this forum and others is to define the space where our differences, whatever they may be, linguistic, religious, the way we dress, whatever, are not translated into a difference in rights and duties.”

Imam Abduljalil Sajid, Chairman of the Muslim Council for Religions and Racial Harmony in the United Kingdom

“I believe religion and the State should work together, they have to mutually understand one another. The State must not be confessional [...] but it has to accept all religions, all belief systems, all cultures.”

Ricardo Blázquez, President of Spain’s Episcopal Conference

“We must make an effort to understand that borders are not merely limits but also means of communication, so too we have to see that society, while it is becoming globalized, is also reaffirming its own identity.”

Flora Winfield, Assistant Secretary General of the World Conference of Religions for Peace

“I believe that our listening volume has to be set just as high as our speaking volume. We have to learn new ways of listening to each other.”

Patrick Desbois, Secretary of the French Episcopal Committee on Relations with Judaism

“We have to have the courage, in each of our religious groups, to teach the history of our religions and, above all, the history of its mistakes and its divisions.”

Michel Serfaty, Rabbi of Ris-Orangis and Philology Professor at Nancy 2 University, Paris

“Dialogue, nowadays, requires us to engage with the other, knowing him, listening to him, and in some way trying to live and coexist with him.”

Fernando Vallespín

“There are some contemporary thinkers, as Jürgen Habermas, who say we are entering a post-secular society, which means that societies can't be absolutely secular and that public debate has to opened up to include a religious discourse.”

Conclusions of the First session

Universal Values

It's crucial that we work with universal and common values – values which are shared by all democratic governments, in the face of relativism – the idea that each culture has its own interpretation of democracy. This involves finding a common space where differences, whatever they may be, do not translate into inequality of rights and duties.

Religion and State

Democracy is based on the concept of citizenship and all forms of exclusion of “the other” which negate citizenship. In other words, citizenship must not be based on exclusive religious beliefs. Democracy is incompatible with any state religion. Nor should policy be inspired by religion. On the other hand, we must not turn laicism into a new state religion.

The state must be non-confessional and must respect all faiths. But there can be no solution if the state does not set up some form of collaboration between government and religions. Religious communities should be considered part of the solution and not seen as part of the problem.

There are believers in all states and these believers must be taken into consideration by the state government. This is to be achieved through mutual respect and, obviously, through respect for the rule of law.

Democracy and religion

A fair laicism takes into account that which all sectors of society have in common. A state is judged to be more democratic, not when it respects the rights of the majority, but in how it respects the rights of its minorities.

The relations between democracy and religion are exacerbated when someone invokes the name of God in order to kill, as they do so in the name of morality. (Terrorism is borne out of, among other things, the frustration of the youth; it is a symptom of marginalized youth.)

Islam and democracy

In order to democratize Islamic societies, extreme caution must be exercised in the way one understands the separation of state and mosque. All religions, not only Islam, have a political dimension; and this dimension needs to be debated in common. Islam is compatible with democracy. A modern society has to be compatible with Islam and Muslims have to respect the rule of law of the country in which they live.

There is a difference between the Western, Christian world and the Muslim world with regards to the separation of Church and State, a phenomenon which has occurred in the former but not in the latter. This difference affects the relationship between both worlds.

Responsible education

For cultures and religions to coexist, shared school curricula are needed at a global level. The real challenge of education is to educate for responsibility. It involves learning ways to narrate in mutual terms, to find a shared narrative recognized by all, while at the same time telling the truth about our own histories.

Christian Europe and its Muslim reality: Necessary self-criticism

By stressing one unique ideal, that of the Christian religion, while considering other religions such as Islam, Judaism and Buddhism the patrimony of African and Asian countries, Europe has contributed to the gulf between different religions. Europe needs to understand that we live in a pluralistic society and must be prepared to integrate a new religious faith, Islam, which brings with it another philosophy and which in some places is a state religion.

Self-criticism, a recognition that we have done wrong and a willingness to ask for forgiveness are all crucial if we are to establish dialogue among cultures and religions. It is also necessary to teach the true history of one's own religion, without evading responsibility for one's mistakes.

Religion and its relationship with power

Making religious organizations accountable and granting them autonomy is a crucial issue. In France, due to the separation of Church and State, religious organizations have become financially independent. We need to review the relationships between religions and power: if they receive state funding, it should be based on the quality of the programmes run by religious organizations, and not merely because they are religion-based organizations.

Immigration and strategies to foster dialogue and understanding

Migratory movements are among the causes of conflicts in modern societies. Worldwide imbalances are the principle cause of migration. A dialogue with “the other” is vital, the “other” who now is now part of our own collective identity, if we are to discover all that we hold in common in our lives. And we need to find together, through this dialogue, a shared language that we may use within our common space. Dialogue is always a means to an end.

A strategy at a number of different levels is required if dialogue is to move forward: at a national level, by practicing integration policies; and at a geopolitical regional level, such as the Mediterranean, which will enable the citizens of the southern seaboard to feel part of the same ideological and political universe. Similarly, Arab/Muslim countries must be given all the help they need to modernize – though we mustn’t forget that the real effort to transform and adapt to the modern world belongs to them.

World disorder is caused by a lack of respect for international law, respect which must urgently be regained.

Second Session: Interculturalism and development

Yasser Abed Rabbo, Member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

“Even the most democratic system would be shaken if the youth were not included in the culture of plurality. The best plans, the best of intentions for progress, will fail if they are not backed up by an education system which fosters development in this direction.”

Fred Halliday, International Relations Professor at the London School of Economics

“With dialogue among civilizations, a few questions remain open. Who runs the debate: civil society or the bearded gentlemen? Another thing: do we really need a dialogue of civilizations if we already have the framework established by the United Nations? When the Declaration of Human Rights was issued in 1948, it didn't speak of cultural diversity, it spoke of universal principles. And each state has to accept those universal principles.”

L. Michael Hager, President of the Education for Employment Foundation, Washington D.C.

“I think there's one crucial factor from a tactical point of view: jobs. [...] I believe that jobs provide reward, money, a lifestyle, maintenance, and what's more, identity and dignity. And I think that these two factors are important, particularly when we speak of cultural harmony.”

Tariq Ramadan Visiting Professor at Oxford's St. Anthony's College, Senior Research Fellow at London's Lokahi Foundation and Islamic Studies Professor

“Today we have to create spaces of mutual trust because they're spaces where one can resist the worldwide mistrust, because the reality we live in is one of real mistrust. [...] I'd like to say that we have to be able to perform an exercise of self-criticism.”

Conclusions of the Second Session

The democratic model: European identity

Multiculturalism has highlighted a number of the weaknesses of liberal democracy. Before preaching democracy to others, we have to look at

ourselves and see what has not worked in our liberal democracies. The questions are: how far can one's tolerance go? And, on how much integration - often interpreted as assimilation - can one demand? Europe has to integrate those new citizens who are the result of immigration and who suffer discrimination. And a distinction has to be made between tolerance and respect. Tolerance is nothing more than suffering the existence of another whom you can't eliminate. Respect is recognizing the richness of the other in relation to our own existence. Recognition of the other and recognition of our shared values have to be our starting points.

Another question revolves around European identity itself. If we are not clear about this identity, how can we establish dialogue with our neighbours on the other side of the Mediterranean? What sort of Europe are we looking for? We are no longer the reference point in Asia, for example. We have to start at home. We have to work hard and try to find that spirit that shone in Europe over the last 50 years. We have to reinvent European identity as a political culture based on citizenship and democracy.

Europe has to decide if it wants to be mono-cultural or multicultural. What do we mean by "the West?" The one which invented nationalism, racism, fascism, colonialism and imperialism? Or the West that is the cradle of multiculturalism, liberalism, respect for human rights and the rule of law? Are we speaking of the West which is helping Palestine to recover the occupied territories or are we speaking of the West which occupies Iraq and Afghanistan? Are we talking about a West which stands for militarism or are we talking about the forces in favour of dialogue? The same could be said of Islam. Are we speaking of Islamic fundamentalism or the modernizers within Islam?

Dialogue with all forces: Development

Europe should not impose democracy on other nations. There must be dialogue to find a way to bring peace to the world.

Regarding development, it is necessary to create national movements with local initiatives, to take into account social realities as well as educational and political ones, and to create partnerships at a local level. Development will only be attained if it is based on local innovation. There is, moreover, a relationship between development and sustainable security.

Fractures do not arise between cultures, but, rather, within cultures themselves. There are fractures between radical and moderate Muslims, just as there are among Westerners, and it is crucial that we do not allow

ourselves to become obsessed with the radicalism of others. Neither should we feed the culture of victimization. Emerging in tandem with the trend towards dialogue, there is a new ideology of fear.

Women

Explaining the causes of violence does not mean justifying violence, but, rather, it is an effort to find solutions. Self-criticism is needed in both Europe and in the Muslim world; in the latter, for example, with regards to the situation of women. Women can, in many countries, provide the necessary leverage for development. We cannot enter into a common space without exercising self-criticism of what we each do. And these issues must not be considered through the prism of any one confession or culture, but should instead be brought into the common arena of citizenship and shared, international principles.

Educating to see other realities

It is vital that we learn together so that the world can grow with shared values. Education must be seized from the hands of extremists of any kind. Until this is done, no effort at reforming the education system will be successful. One problem with religion is that it has often been interpreted by extremists. Education should stress universal and democratic values, and transcend religious debates. Education is crucial to our understanding of others. It is vital that it be based on history and the diversity of histories. The greatest problem today with our education systems, both those of the West as well as those of chiefly Muslim societies, is that they offer extremely reductionistic history classes when compared with the reality of pluralism. We have to work with a more critical eye on our education systems.

Economic inequality: Employment, health, identity and dignity

Efforts in the field of education aimed at fostering an opening up to the West will not be fruitful as long as the West is perceived by Arab countries to sponsor injustice.

Social and economic differences are more significant than the clash of cultures. There are ever-increasing imbalances in wealth. Culture and civilization may be seen as instruments of political domination.

If we are to reduce these differences, globalization needs to be humanized, by means of a milder form of capitalism, where there is more equitable distribution. Employment is important in this regard; without work, one cannot sustain oneself nor possess an identity or dignity. Arabs and Muslims ask the West for fairer treatment and reciprocity, a place in the

world for everyone. Nor must we forget those African countries scourged by AIDS. In this dialogue among civilizations, which is supposed to exclude nobody, let us not exclude some from the right to life itself. We must not overlook the fact that a framework has already existed for quite some time: the UN.

Third Session: Education as the answer

Marcio Barbosa, Deputy Director of UNESCO

“Globalization fosters exchange and communication, but it can also lead to misunderstanding. That’s why it’s vital to be equipped with the values, institutions and capacity to face new forms of discrimination and ignorance. All of the media must be used to combat ignorance, intolerance, xenophobia and racism.”

Sami Nair, Political Sciences Professor at Paris VIII University

“You can’t discuss with another if the discussion is based solely on the reaffirmation of judgements emanating from our own culture. In this case, we’re not talking about dialogue but, rather, discussions based on prejudice.”

Maria Jesus San Segundo, Education and Science Minister of Spain

“I believe that the advent of education for citizenship is a clear sign of the concern there is in society with giving our youth the best possible tools for living together in the future, of the concern there is with teaching them actively to live together from an early age.”

Juan Goytisolo, Writer

“Experience teaches us that cultures that close in on themselves and seek racial purity collapse. While those that are open and try to take on board what they can from others are the ones which show the greatest signs of life.”

Maximo Cajal, Advisor to the Spanish Prime Minister on the UN’s Alliance of Civilizations

“One of the objectives of the High-Level Group which is about to begin a period of assessment on the Alliance of Civilizations is education, aimed, as you would expect, at the youth. Literally, the mandate says: ‘To reach out to the youth of the world, in order to instil the values of moderation and cooperation, and to promote appreciation of diversity.’”

Gema Martín Muñoz, Sociology and Arab Studies Professor at Madrid’s Autonoma University

“We are not facing up to the real global debate in which all citizens have to participate – Muslims and non-Muslims – and on top of that we’re building up a pernicious mistrust of each other, that duality of “us and them.” And on both sides there is this “us and them,” that is, on the non-Muslim side and the Muslim side. And this is an obstacle to the full integration of Muslims as normal, everyday, ordinary citizens in our society. And I think that it’s the basic key to integration.”

Antoni Segura, Co-Director of Barcelona’s University Centre for International Historical Studies

“I don’t believe that democracy can be exported by force of missiles. But instead, that’s exactly what we’re doing. And that is also part of our cultural values. If we don’t realize that this is perverting our cultural values and giving what is worthwhile defending a terrible image, then no Alliance of Civilizations is possible.”

Nasr Abu Zaid, Ibn Rushd Chair of Humanism and Islam at Utrecht University, the Netherlands

“The word civilization should not be used in the plural. I believe there is only one civilization with a diversity of cultures, with a diversity of viewpoints. Because if we say dialogue of civilizations, this means that dialogue is already impossible since civilizations, in the plural, have different ways of seeing things, meaning there is no possibility of dialogue.”

Jose Alvarez Junco, Director of the Political and Constitutional Studies Centre of Spain and Professor of the History of Political Movements at Complutense University

“It’s all about educating children for a world that's different from the one they now live in and that’s different from the one their parents and grandparents lived in. Which is the exact opposite to what religions and nationalisms try to do, that is, to idealize a culturally homogenous past and tell children that they have to be faithful to it.”

Conclusions of the third session

The challenges of a globalized world: a new education model for a new reality

Identity must never be so clear, strong, or monolithic that it becomes a wall, that it becomes a barrier that prevents communication, or that it

becomes impermeable to the influence of other cultures. We all have a number of cultural identities and all of them are a composite or a mix of previously existing cultures. Globalization, meanwhile, tends to reinforce identities, and even creates some new ones.

The greatest challenge of the next few years is not the clash of civilizations, but the clash of ignorances. And faced with these new forms of ignorance, we must create a new literacy, one which is not limited merely to reading and writing, but to providing the necessary knowledge to know who is who and to enable us to belong to a community. Learning to live together in a globalized world involves an unprecedented commitment to gaining a knowledge of each other, sustainable development, the free exchange of ideas and knowledge, migratory movements, the sharing of values and, especially, the sharing of diversity. Combating ignorance involves, above all, investing in education. One of the greatest social fractures is that involving access to education.

One example of this ignorance is the lack of knowledge of history and of our shared cultures. We will not be able to understand another culture if we are unable to understand our own culture.

Education should be based on quality for everyone. Educational qualifications must not merely open doors to professional careers, but must also open hearts and minds. They have to combat ignorance of “the other” and educate about the diversity that exists in the world. They have to prepare the individual for an increasingly complex and diverse world and they have to incorporate those attitudes and values which are essential for citizenship in a globalized world. We have to focus, above all, on young people. Combating ignorance also involves initiatives which promote culture.

We must design new ways of learning so we can improve, not just our knowledge of our own history, but that of others as well. Education is the most effective tool for the integration of the different communities within a country. Only education can lead to a fruitful coexistence.

Dialogue and equality

In order to hold a dialogue, one must have a relationship of self-criticism with one’s own culture. In dialogue, self-criticism is vital. But one should also have the right to differ with other cultures.

Dialogue should be heterodox. Dialogue should provoke and raise difficult questions. This is the *sine qua non* condition for respect towards others.

Any dialogue among civilizations must begin with the relationship we have with immigrants in our own countries. One of the greatest challenges today in Europe is that of the struggle against racism and xenophobia. Our schools should play a basic part in educating against racism and in favour of diversity. But schools are not the only places to learn this; what is happening in the rest of society and in the family has an impact, as does what is going on in the media and in many other spheres.

Religion in schools as an academic pursuit

One important problem, within education, is teaching about religion. The place religion has in our schools should be the result of a pact for coexistence. It is vital that religions be taught in the plural, and not from a religion-centred perspective. Religion within the education system should be taught from the standpoint of history and the sociology of religions. Religion and identity belong to the private sphere; while culture and education are part of the public sphere. Teaching religion as an academic fact and as a cultural phenomenon is one thing and it is another thing all together to use public schools to indoctrinate and to advance propaganda. Teaching about religion must not be left in the hands of religious leaders, whether they are priests, imams or rabbis. The political use of the concept of God and the concept of religion by religious leaders is a problem.

Inequality, poverty and injustice

The European model is characterized by the ceding of sovereignty to reach a consensus and the practice of policies of solidarity. Cultural differences must not lead us to overlook the real political problems, inequalities, poverty and injustice when it comes to applying international law. Democracy cannot be exported by force of missiles. That is an idea which also forms part of our cultural values. If we allow this we are perverting our own values and undermining all dialogue among civilizations.