

# The University and the Intercultural Dialogue

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# Preamble

Institutions do not light candles as a tribute to passing years, nor do they mark off their days on calendars, for sustainability in a demanding and competitive world is never attained over time, but earned through perseverance and planning.

Thus, we only celebrate our anniversary because it is the culmination of projects realized, and of dreams poured into projects awaiting realization. It would not be fitting to commemorate the foundation of the University unless we come bearing offerings of progress or innovation to be laid before Our Lady of Seeds, proving that we are worthy of her blessings and that our University is worthy of being celebrated in anniversaries of things present and future and not commemorations of things past.

We are celebrating our anniversary this year with a new addition to the University; the Mejdlaya Zgharta campus that was launched with all the confidence and competence expected of our institution and the promise of a long journey of expansion, be it in terms of quality or course offerings. We are celebrating our anniversary this year with a new annex to our main campus, housing the Faculty of Business Administration and proving the University's responsiveness

in meeting the needs of a growing student body drawn by the high repute of the University, its faculty and staff. We are celebrating our anniversary as a way-station not a destination ... a joyous moment for drinking a toast to hard work and cooperation, a brief moment after which we should resume our heated race against time, market demands, scientific advances and all modern-day requisites.

We have established a tradition of stopping in our celebrations to reflect on key issues of concern to the University in the Annual Speech, laying them before you for discussion and thought. Thus, we addressed in previous years inter-university relations, higher education policy, and scientific research in higher education ... This year, we shall tackle "The University and the Promotion of Intercultural Dialogue".

Our choice was based on the intrinsic relevance of the topic, as it will be showcased by the International Association of Universities (IAU) Conference that will be held in Lebanon this year between November 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> at the Notre Dame University (NDU) – Louaize and to which our University will bring its contribution through its participation in the organizing committee. But this topic is particularly pertinent to Lebanese universities as they are replete with cultural diversity, and as training and education on managing and investing in cultural diversity are among their top priorities.

The premise of our discussion covers the broader conceptions of the topic, ranging from clear definitions of culture, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, to its components, mechanisms and challenges. Our arguments will be made based on deductive thinking, shifting from general statements to specific cases; from the world and on to our own University, through Lebanon.

## **1. Intercultural Dialogue**

### **A. Culture: Definitions and Problems**

We must begin by drawing a distinction between the two meanings of the term culture: the first being descriptive and referring to the body of beliefs, knowledge and behaviors relating to religion, science, customs and politics that characterizes a particular human group, and is synonymous with nature. Here, culture reflects all the meanings and expressions that Man has added to life, in his creative interaction with nature and human beings, in given time and space.

The second meaning is prescriptive and refers to a particular level of diversified knowledge that transcends the bounds of specialization and professional competencies, and is reflected in a form of distinguished behavior. The role of intellectuals is featured under this category.

In the discussion at hand, we will deal with culture under its first definition that goes back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The basis of modern-day conceptions of culture can be ascribed to

British anthropologist Edward Burnett Taylor (1832-1917) who argued in his 1871 book **Primitive Culture** that culture or civilization is a complex whole including the knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs and all other skills and norms acquired by human beings as members of society, wherein society is created and remains viable over time.

Anthropology played a major role in crystallizing this concept, which was perhaps meant as a critique to the universality of human nature put forth by the thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment based on Christian tradition and other influences.

This turning point in thought was mirrored in the concept of Human Rights. While the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen placed individual and political rights above all else, and while the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the predominance of economic rights under pressure from labor unions in the light of the Industrial Revolution, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights – an article of which our University has made a point of dissecting and analyzing each year – heralded the era of cultural diversity, the distinctive characteristics of each human society, but maintained nonetheless the oneness of the human species and the equality of all human beings in dignity and fundamental rights.

Consequently, UNESCO defines culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group. It encompasses, in

addition to arts and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs"<sup>1</sup>, in other words it encompasses the models of behavior, thought and emotion that define Man's body of activities in his relation with nature, Man and the Almighty<sup>2</sup>.

We may distribute the components of culture over three levels:

- Values and Beliefs Level: the body of unconscious cognitive structures and common knowledge that filter society's perception of reality and its modes of life without raising them to the rank of theories and evidence. These are similar to the roots of a tree; indispensable for life but outwardly invisible.<sup>3</sup>
- Institutional Level: as a structural representation of values and beliefs, and a referential framework for behavior. It may range over different levels of rationalization, but is not necessarily linked to the degree of significance. To go back to our tree, this level is the trunk that connects branches to roots.

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<sup>1</sup> This definition is in line with the conclusions of the *World Conference on Cultural Policies* (MONDIACULT, Mexico City, 1982), of the *World Commission on Culture and Development* (Our Creative Diversity, 1995), and of the *Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies for Development* (Stockholm, 1995) referred to in the *UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity* (2005).

<sup>2</sup> ABOU S., *Cultures et Droits de l'Homme*, Ed. Hachette, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Tree simile borrowed from Kalpana Das, Head of the Intercultural Institute of Montreal, Canada.

▪ Behavioral Level: the most visible elements of culture, reflected in the whole of behaviors and actions in all aspects of life. This level is similar to a tree's branches and foliage that are most exposed to and capable of change and evolution whenever these are aligned with the elements of the first level, since branches cannot bear the types of fruit that they were not predisposed to bear by their nature, an identity held within the roots.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the concept of culture as human diversity emerged, and eventually led to examining the nature of relationships and mutual impacts among cultural worlds. On this subject, Claude Levi-Strauss contended that human civilization was the coexistence of cultures exhibiting the maximum possible diversities<sup>5</sup> and that it was impossible to value one over the other. Others countered, however, that such an attitude, while refuting deadly ethnocentrism, ventured into the premise of deadly cultural relativism, where all values become particular cultural products. In fact, they maintained that such a view could allow for blatant human rights violations as cultural specificities, such as abiding by cannibalism in some tribes, stoning the adulteress and cutting off the hands of thieves in some Muslim countries, practicing the genital mutilation of girls in Africa and the Middle-East, and segregating and

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<sup>4</sup> VACHON R., "*Guswenta ou l'impératif interculturel*" (Guswenta or the Intercultural Imperative), in *Interculture*, issue 127, volume XXVIII, n<sup>o</sup>. 2, pp. 36-50.

<sup>5</sup> LEVI-STRAUSS C., *Race et histoire*, Paris, Gonthier-UNESCO, 1961.

annihilating the untouchables of India, under the pretence that: to each his own truth<sup>6</sup>.

In this context, Amin Maalouf criticizes the Western attitude of turning a blind eye to human rights violations in certain communities under pretence of respecting their cultural specificity. In *Deadly Identities*, the author suggests that every violation of the basic rights of men and women in the name of some specific heritage, such as religious norms – negates the essence of existence. To respect others and their history, he posits, is to consider them part of the same human race, not some other inferior one<sup>7</sup>.

The issue is still of relevance today: Where should I draw the line between my respect for the cultural specificity of others and my right, nay, my duty to defend human rights and universal values? How do I keep this duty of mine from turning into cultural imperialism?

### **B. Cultural Diversity, Cultural Pluralism and Intercultural Dialogue**

Cultural diversity is a concept of more recent date. It shifted from defining diversity within a single cultural system, to an anti-imperial and anti-colonial instrument wielded by

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<sup>6</sup> BRUCKNER P., *Le Sanglot de l'Homme blanc, Tiers Monde, Culpabilité et haine de soi*, (The Tears of the White Man: Third World, culpability and self-hatred), Paris, Le Seuil, 1983.

<sup>7</sup> MAALOUF A., *Les identités meurtrières*, (Deadly Identities), Paris, Grasset, 1998, pp. 123-124.

the theorists of developing countries in opposing the "civilizing" projects carried out by colonials. The UNESCO 1982 Mexico City Declaration on Cultural Policies was the first UN document addressing cultural diversity.

In 1993, when the United States proposed a revision of the quota system that had controlled audio-visual production since 1947, European Union member-States refuted the suggestion on the grounds of their duty to defend "cultural diversity" which could be directly jeopardized by free market practices.

In 1998, the Stockholm Summit issued a defining declaration that would become the framework for cultural policies in UNESCO member-States. The declaration highlighted the following:

- Noting the strong links between sustainable development and culture;
- Considering cultural rights as fundamental human rights;
- Considering intercultural dialogue as a prerequisite to peaceful coexistence and interaction among nations and communities;
- Affirming the respect for all cultural identities.

In 2001, a non-binding declaration was issued by UNESCO in the wake of the 9/11 events. It was an opportunity for member States to "reaffirm their conviction that intercultural dialogue is the best guarantee of peace and to reject outright the theory of the inevitable clash of cultures

and civilizations"<sup>8</sup>. This declaration considered cultural diversity to be on a par with biodiversity in nature and heralded the shift from calling for the respect of the different other to acknowledging diversity as a key component of our common identity. The awareness of the constituent elements of each identity, therefore, consolidates diversity not merely as a framework for intercultural relationships, but for the dynamism of cultures.

According article 2 of the declaration, cultural pluralism is the political response to the realities of cultural diversity.

In a few words, literature on cultural diversity betrayed the predominance of an ecological model that strove to preserve cultural heritage from extinction. However, in the wake of 9/11, the tone changed and culture as a concept took on new directions; it was no longer a matter of managing cultural wealth but became a strategic concern. Intercultural dialogue, hence, became the world's response to terror and to religious fanaticism, a preventive measure against an allegedly inevitable clash of civilizations.

### **C. What Does Intercultural Dialogue Mean? What Are Its Conditions?**

Intercultural dialogue can be defined as "an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals, groups with

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<sup>8</sup> Koïchiro Matsuura, UNESCO Director-General, Preamble of the *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*.

different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect"<sup>9</sup>.

The conditions assumed by those engaged in dialogue change according to their positions within discourse. The majority imposes its own set of rules that allow no compromise or divergence unless within their approved bounds. These are to the West today: human rights, democracy and the primacy of right. The minority resorts to the same but with a defensive overtone that could be sensed, for instance, in ALECSO's "Frame of Reference, Achievements, and Strategic Prospects", and address repeated pleas to the West for "having faith in others, respecting their differences, (...) based on parity and equality, free from subservience, conquest and appropriation, (...) harmful penetration or intentional conquest, (...), precluding prejudice, free from mythologizing, weird, superficial decisions, and purely imagined misrepresentations of the other" as Arab culture is deemed to be "facing nowadays a vicious, unfair adverse campaign that misrepresents it as the breeding ground of intolerance, fanaticism and aggressiveness"<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> *Living Together as Equals in Dignity, White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue*, issued by the Council of Europe's Ministers of Foreign Affairs at their 118<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Session, Strasbourg, May 7, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> The Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization Director-General Dr. Mongi Bousnina's Introduction, p. 6-7-8-9.

The peoples of the world, therefore, approach dialogue from different angles.

While European literature on the subject focuses on managing cultural diversity within its communities where immigration is the preponderant issue of concern, Arab literature focuses on bridging the gap between waffle or "the categorical, dogmatic attitudes [pervading] our perception of our civilization, which is for the most part selective, glorifying, (...) indeed a-historical for it implies rejecting historical relativity and dialectics while unwarrantably sticking to a dubious absolute principle," and the overwhelming appropriation of dominant cultures.

In Lebanon, intercultural dialogue is a particularly thorny issue, considering the implicit distortion it undergoes:

On the one hand is literature priding itself on Lebanon's status as a melting pot of East and West; a fertile ground for intercultural dialogue. On the other hand, however, is literature sending alarming messages, explicit or implicit, about the political dimensions entailed by acknowledging cultural diversity, since it used to be leveraged to the advantage of federalism, partitioning and other political projects during the war.

But there are other conditions that are self-imposing on majorities and minorities alike. These are normative and transcend power struggles; they are the prerequisites of any effective dialogue that will not suffer being hijacked by myth:

- First, dialogue requires acknowledging cultural diversity as an irrefutable truth: a recognition frowned upon by those same communities teeming with diversity, that either go about affirming their cultural unity and repressing specific cultures, as in the Lebanese Constitution affirming Lebanon's Arab identity, as though the mere word guarantees quenching any primary sense of belonging or specificity; or by claiming universality, a fact that plagues much of the Arab literature which hastens to snub any invitation to cultural dialogue by countering that Arabic culture has no use for it because of its universality.
- Second, dialogue requires acknowledging others and their differences, but neither as threats to social cohesion, nor as stereotypes.
- Moreover, dialogue requires acknowledging our own pluralism and reconciling our varied backgrounds. Identity, by definition, is not that which makes me resemble others, or that which confirms my being an exact likeness of the herd, but that which sets me apart. My distinctive identity comes from a specific and unique blend of many elements, their interaction with my natural disposition and past experience. The words of Amin Maalouf again come to mind; we should encourage each other to accept our personal pluralism, to each understand our identity as the whole of our different backgrounds, instead of stripping them into a single greater

affiliation, into an instrument of exclusion and of conflict even<sup>11</sup>.

- Parties engaged in dialogue should also acknowledge one another. Openness would be terribly lacking if it were not mutual; if it were an openness of the oppressed minority onto a hegemonic majority drowning its voice. Dialogue would not be achieved by cultures if, by coming together, one claims to be civilizing the other, and raising it from its squalor to the higher realms of humanity.

#### **D. Intercultural Dialogue, For What Purpose?**

Of course, the growing talk of intercultural dialogue across the world stems from particular circumstances, namely the 9/11 events, which had the following impacts:

- The magnification of the religious element over all other components of identity<sup>12</sup>.

After the worldwide, yet unjustified (based on its scientific value), success of Samuel Huntington's book "*The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*" that divided the world into civilization sub-worlds of a mainly religious identify and foresaw a violent clash between Islam, backed by Buddhism, on the one hand and Christianity on the other, the world shifted to exaggerating the issue of identity in general,

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<sup>11</sup> MAALOUF A., *op. cit.*, p. 183.

<sup>12</sup> See CORM G., "*La question religieuse au XXI<sup>ème</sup> siècle : Géopolitique et crise de la post-modernité*" (Religion and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Geopolitics and the Crisis of Postmodernity), Editions La Découverte, Paris, 2006 (Ed. de Poche, 2007).

and its religious element in particular, in an overarching intellectual trend that had been molding itself since the end of World War II.

This trend was so complex that it radically changed our perception of reality, and religion became the only key to understanding the intricacies of history, politics and economics.

But if the resurgence of religion or "*The Revenge of God*", as indicated in Gilles Kepel's book<sup>13</sup>, reflects a certain deep-seated longing for the absolute in the human soul and the collective conscious and unconscious that modernity has failed to eradicate, it is nonetheless associated with theological stagnation in all religions, producing such religious phenomena as the megachurch movement among others.

Hence the religious undertones of most intercultural dialogue initiatives.

And Lebanon is no exception to the rule. In fact, the entrenched Lebanese perception of denomination as equal to community nullifies, in one's awareness of one's identity, significant elements such as production patterns, the nature of familial relationships, social status and rank... Thus, political dialogue in Lebanon takes on the form of denominational discourse, where all matters are sectarianized,

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<sup>13</sup> KEPEL G., *La revanche de Dieu. Chrétiens, Juifs et musulmans à la reconquête du monde* (*The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the Modern World*), Paris, Seuil, 1992.

and the lines between opinion and confessional belief are blurred.

- The magnification of the impact of "intercultural dialogue" in consolidating world peace over other elements, particularly international justice and the active enforcement of international law. If intercultural dialogue is brandished by the modern world as a weapon against the so-called identity wars, we should nonetheless keep in mind that identities – be they religious or other – are but tactics employed in war; the latter drawing its symbolic instruments for mobilization, and not its root causes, from religious configurations<sup>14</sup>.

## 2. The Role of Higher Education

The world of higher education is inextricably linked to the problematic issue of intercultural dialogue, and is perhaps its most natural partner, as higher education originated from an undeniably intercultural setting with the creation of the first universities in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. But the universities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century face a new set of challenges in this context<sup>15</sup>:

1) Managing the cultural diversity of the student body, faculty and staff in such a way as to promote fertile dialogue

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<sup>14</sup> KAUFMAN S.J., *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> See "Intercultural Learning and Dialogue", the Budapest seminar organized by the International Association of Universities (IAU), 2004.

and exchange, and preserve productivity and stability within universities.

2) Developing culturally-sensitive teaching methods and content, and sponsoring serious research in this field; allowing higher education to fulfill its natural role in stimulating dialogue across society.

3) Developing the structures and systems of higher education institutions in accordance with the cultural diversity of those enrolled in them and the global student movement.

However, if by dialogue we strive for a means to prevent conflict, we should first look closely into the nature and types of conflicts that could emerge in universities, and how much of their causes may be ascribed to cultural disparities. This would eventually lead us to defining intercultural dialogue in universities, its mechanisms and fields of implementation.

### **A. Types of Conflict**

**Underlying Conflict:** Passive discord or rivalry unacknowledged by the sides thereof, either because they are themselves unaware of the conflict or because neither or all have no interest in and/or capacity of admitting it. Such conflict may emerge in higher education among the administrative body or faculty due to authority overlap, feeling underappreciated or insecure, or competition lacking trust in the prevalence of competence; it is detrimental to

productivity and the work climate. But it is also common to find such types of conflict in a cultural context. Here, suppressed and checked feelings in day-to-day dealing are pervasive and lead to the accumulation of negativity.

**Open Conflict:** Conflict of interest or opinion expressed openly in behaviors and statements. Its adverse impacts go beyond the confines of the initial conflict, as relevant actors tend to justify shortcomings by said conflict, or take refuge behind the sides thereof as a means of shirking their duties. However, as soon as conflict erupts on the grounds of "identity", the odds of resolving it within the institutional unit become slim, since colleagues often avoid and disregard sensitive issues, or take radical and rigid attitudes that exacerbate the problem instead of resolving it.

**Superficial Conflict:** Shallow misunderstandings. In this case, the good intentions of well-wishers are of prime importance, as they strive not to blow the matter out of proportion, but bring it back to its actual size in order to clear any misunderstanding. It is important here that we not hasten to color mere misunderstandings with the shades of a "clash" of cultures, religions or nationalities.

## **B. Origins of Conflict**

Conflict is a natural part of life, a driving force of progress and change. However, if conflict escalates and runs amok it becomes a hindrance. So, what generates conflict?

Opinions on this matter vary, but the most salient are:

**Social conflict theory:** This theory claims that conflict stems from perpetual polarization, distrust and antagonism between different groups within society, or between coalitions and teams within the same institution. In fact, such a conflict within an institution is a symptom of dysfunction in its organizational structure and internal relations.

**Human needs theory:** This theory argues that the root causes of conflict are unmet basic human needs, whether physiological, psychological or social. Some conflicts may arise due to the arbitrary allocation of salaries, or due to basic rights violations. But we should also remember that respect, dignity and recognition are basic human needs too. For instance, one may be satisfied by his level of income as it allows him to conveniently fulfill his vital needs, although he does not receive from superiors, subordinates or colleagues those signs of appreciation, gratitude and encouragement that he longs for or needs.

**Cultural theory:** This theory suggests that conflicts emerge from cultural disparities among the sides thereof.

So, the question here is whether this type of conflict exists in our University, and whether we are aware of it. Have we

ever considered that the barriers facing our work or communications may be rooted in cultural disparities?

### **C. From Debate to Dialogue**

Lack of dialogue is the first indicator of discord between two or more parties, and the first step in peaceful conflict resolution is to reinstitute dialogue between belligerents. In fact, the key aim of dialogue is to uncover the underlying needs and interests behind the declared stances. Dialogue is not a debate, though, as the latter is a mere back-and-forth of opposed opinions.

If institutional regulations fail at settling a particular conflict, then the dispute is too biased to be ended satisfactorily, and we resort to dialogue. But not all discussions are dialogue, just as not all verbal exchanges between sides are fertile soil for a dialogue capable of resolving conflict.

Consequently, distinguishing between dialogue and debate becomes indispensable.

Debaters base their arguments on their absolute belief in a single truth: that which they hold. Their contribution to dialogue is therefore marked by an undercurrent of clash aimed at proving the differing attitude's invalidity. Such debaters only listen to their interlocutor to grasp at opportunities for retaliation, since they are more concerned

about ending the discussion as victors than arriving at a resolution of the issue at hand. They strive to settle the argument as they would a round in a battle of wills. They care not for smoothing out the dilemma behind the debate.

More often than not, university students, professors or staff members feel that the dialogue they are invite to engage in for resolving a conflict is nothing but an elaborate production for thrusting upon them a preset decision. As a result, their faith in dialogue is shaken to the core, and they either set out on a search for other means of conflict management, or choose to deny its sheer existence.

Dialogue; however, is a true collaborative search based on the conviction that the pieces of the full answer to the question at hand are withheld, separately, by each and every side in the conflict. Consequently, parties engaged in dialogue, in order to be truly worthy of this title, should do their utmost not to overcome the opponent, but to find common ground by acknowledging the strong points of the case presented by that rival.

The crucial difference between dialogue and debate is the degree of transparency that the individual displays in approaching his interlocutor. If we were to put forth three levels: attitudes, interests and needs, that is what we say we want, what we actually want, and what should be achieved for

us, then debaters stand at the first level and dialoguers cross to the third.

Nevertheless, unilateral transparency could be detrimental. Here, the institution, or its representative in facilitating the dialogue, plays a role in urging the sides to uncover the real interests behind their stances. Then, a distinction would be drawn, within the bounds of these interests, between vital needs and negotiable items.

#### **D. Barriers to Intercultural Dialogue**

Intercultural dialogue, whether interpersonal or institutional here addressed, could be faced with certain barriers that often spell its failure. Among the most salient of these are:

- **Waffle or cant:** A collection of arguments and terms commonly used in particular circumstances as a grossly distorted simulacrum of dialogue. Among such statements we find "students are the focal point of the educational process", or "public interest above all else" and "change doesn't happen overnight". Although some might have a grain of truth to them, such ringing expressions become signs of the hollowness and ineffectiveness of dialogue.

In a dialogue between sides from different cultural backgrounds, waffle speech is rampant. The reasons for this are many, but the most prominent is cultural stereotyping that prompts sides to resort to flattery with a flourish of terms

from the lofty realms of equality and the respect of otherness, and a generous helping of denial strategies ... particularly the affirmation that the problem does not arise from cultural differences!

Added to the above is the dangerous possibility of being insensitive to the underlying chauvinism rooted in our everyday language.

- Prejudice as to the pointlessness of dialogue, that dialogue is a lost cause, because of some apathetic "laissez-faire" attitude considering that every man is for himself and God for us all or a conviction that "a leopard cannot change its spots".
- False generalizations about all problems being one and the same and each member of the group being but a carbon copy of the next. This latter instance is of particular significance in intercultural dialogue. Our subconscious teems with associations between specific qualities and backgrounds. We judge that other religions or nationalities must inevitably act according to a set of behaviors ranging from personal hygiene to faith in God, through dress, diet and intellectual competencies. Muslims act like so, Europeans act like such ... and the person we are addressing becomes a mere cliché.
- Writing off the other side as the enemy whose loss is my gain, and turning dialogue into a lose-lose rivalry. Intercultural dialogue essentially becomes a matter of my understanding of truth versus my opponent's understanding of it. In fact, it is hard for us to accept that truth is relative, especially when we

set out from a belief in transcendence. But religious truth never forces itself on others; those who do not share my religious convictions are still entitled to the respect of human dignity and freedom preached by my faith.

- Obstinate arrogance. It may be that we become persuaded of our interlocutor's stance, or that this latter succeeds in drilling holes into the barricades of our convictions and attitudes. But we rarely confess to that out in the open in order to save face personally or, worse still, to do so in the name of the culture we represent. Thus, my discussion with an employee or a coworker of a different denomination, nationality or community becomes a dialogue between our two societies or religions, and each seeming solution takes on the tinge of a concession. So, dialogue on work-related issues with a Muslim, foreign or religiously observant colleague... turns into a dialogue with Islam, the West or religious orthodoxy...

- Emotional over-reactivity in dialogue and the inability of sides to draw a line between personal feelings towards and rational judgments about a person or a problem. This leads to ad hominem attacks on an opponent, insulting him personally.

- Unfamiliarity of dialoguers with the distinction between stance and need.

### **E. University management and Intercultural Dialogue**

Multinational corporations strive to manage and respect cultural difference without adversely affecting production and professional standards. In Lebanon, we have grown accustomed to difference, managing, or deftly circumventing, it in an almost instinctive manner. Nonetheless, we are ever wary, as evidenced by our history, of the shift from coexistence to interwarring whenever we perceive a threat to our "identities".

Today a new crop of quality standards has emerged in corporate evaluation, namely the environmental engagement of businesses and their commitment to sustainable development (green companies), to clear ethical norms in both action and words (corporate social responsibility), and to the respect of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue (inclusive business).

Inclusion and integration play a major role in stimulating optimal productivity and in creating equal opportunities for career advancement. Hence, the model inclusive business is one that abides by the principles of democracy and the right to acquire knowledge, in allowing:

- free and equitable access to information on the evolution of the job market, positions, vacancies and other issues without bias as to gender, ethnicity or faith ...

- true equality, and not the purely abstract kind, that does not champion equal rights merely in theory, but actively seeks to institute equal opportunities for all regardless of their cultural background.

It is vital that such businesses understand the cultural particularity of each employee. These individuals are not products of stereotyped identities, nor can they be identified through the lens of preconceived judgments. They are carriers of specific cultural heritages and the makers of culture. Consequently, businesses need to work on eradicating perceptions and attitudes rooted in racial, cultural, ethnic or other forms of discrimination.

In fact, D'Iribarne<sup>16</sup> argues that businesses are communities, very much dependent on internal solidarity, and that they are even more so than any other body given the harsh environment forced upon them by economic pressures.

University administration is also called to forcefully and urgently address the problem. If the "difficulty" facing other institutions is one of economic competitiveness, then universities in general, and Lebanese universities in particular, face in addition to this issue of concern one that is infinitely more complex, namely their contribution to educating

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<sup>16</sup> D'IRIBARNE P., "Misère et grandeur d'un modèle français d'entreprise", In SAINSAULIEU R., *L'entreprise, une affaire de société*, PFNSP, 1990, p. 265.

generations of students on interacting peacefully and constructively within the context of their diversity.

But how can we build this solidarity from the respect of cultural differences? By which I mean: How can we arrive at building that which is communal from that which is distinctive and pulls individuals towards singularity? Can we keep the fundamental values of higher education from slipping into the relativism entailed by recognizing the legitimacy of cultural diversity and the right of a wide spectrum of opinions, values, references and behaviors to be expressed within the workplace?<sup>17</sup>

The problem lies, then, in maintaining cohesion while respecting diversity, not only as the juxtaposition of two distinct entities, but as a peaceful and creative interaction between them. This would create a network of relationships: vertical, rooted in allegiance and hierarchy, and horizontal, intertwined and acknowledging the intrinsic and unique value of each individual and his integral right to express difference, a right that is not undermined by his rank within the established order.

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<sup>17</sup> SAINSAULIEUR, *op. cit.*, PFNSP, 1990.

## F. University Professors and Intercultural Dialogue

Unfortunately, most studies conducted around the world on bringing up tolerant citizens mainly focus on pre-higher education, whereas professors are only expected to advocate research in cultural diversity and create favorable conditions for intercultural activities within universities.

But we are all well aware that today's universities are a far cry from what they used to be, that the students we stand before need our guidance not only on the matters of research and the intellect, but on the ethics of living as well.

Moreover, the multiconfessional Lebanese society and the unconscious marshalling of the students have played a part in changing what was supposed to be, in young people their age, a critical distance from family and cultural heritage into a blind and violent intractability when it comes to their *deadly identities*.

It is therefore indispensable that university professors be equipped with the following competencies:

- Drawing on their knowledge in the humanities to interpret classroom and extracurricular realities and adapt to the needs of students from across the spectrum.
- Building healthy and appropriate relationships with students and colleagues from different cultural backgrounds.
- Skillfully managing culturally diverse classes.

- Practicing multiperspective reflection.
- Having critical language awareness, and being particularly sensitive to its racial and ostracizing implications.
- Creating opportunities for direct contact and acquaintanceship among students (teamwork ...)

### **G. Intercultural Dialogue in Higher Education: For What Purpose?**

Intercultural dialogue education is set to achieve the following:

- Changing our perception of cultural diversity as a threat and hindrance, or vulnerability, in the socio-political structure of our Lebanese community. It is only then that we understand it for the enriching experience it really is, and not the formula used for conferences showcasing clichéd slogans on respecting the right to be different, on tolerance and peaceful coexistence. We are therefore called upon to consider the activities, within and without the classroom, which will effect this transformation. But we are also called upon to evaluate the effectiveness of such activities in achieving a range of identified, measurable and time-bound objectives through transparent indicators showing the behavioral progress made.
- Allowing us – faculty, staff and students – to experience the confusion, threat and worry resulting from the disintegration of our cultural convictions, of the stereotyped images we have of ourselves and others. The flaw of

traditional education on respecting difference lay in its perpetual belief that difference is indeed the problem of others, and that all *I* can do is try as best *I* can to be tolerant instead of taking an exclusionist or isolationist approach. But to achieve the kind of education we are striving for, we should wipe out all preconceived notions. We should promote the formulation of a personal, informed, critical and open conception of cultural diversity. We should break free of our egocentrism to communicate with the different other, without exclusion. We should first take a self-examining look at ourselves as carriers of inherited thoughts, perceptions and values, learn to see the world from the other side of the looking glass.

- Mapping the constituent elements of cultural identity. It reveals how certain components are transformed, by force of habit and lack of critical thinking, into givens and absolute truths, and breaks down the shallow interpretations that sum up the essence of identity in one of its aspects (race, faith ...). In fact, it offers insight into the overlap of identities (gender, class, disability ...), their dynamism and flexibility. It urges us to resist stagnant and discriminatory beliefs, to be sensitive to the ostracizing dimensions of everyday language and behaviors.

## **H. Fields of Intercultural Dialogue at our University**

The fields that certainly lend themselves most readily to intercultural dialogue are Religious Studies, History and Languages.

1) Some might believe that the religious homogeneity of students at the Faculty of Theology exempts staff and faculty from investing in intercultural dialogue. But this is a false assumption.

First, these students, who are being prepared for teaching, preaching or research, will be in contact with a diverse public. They will be working in a community where neither preaching nor teaching can afford to ignore social realities and the wealth of diversity.

Second, theology students play a key role in promoting dialogue within Christianity itself. Though uniting, religion does not nullify those cultural particularities that stem from our experience as peoples, local churches or individuals. Of course, Easterners have their own specificities, reflected in their theological terminology, sensitivities, rites and readings of the history and role of the Church. Eastern Christians do not perceive the Crusades the way European Christians do, just as Europeans cannot draw on the same living experience as Eastern Christians in the matter of dialogue between Christianity and Islam.

Third, the Faculty of Theology strives to be a center of interfaith dialogue. If nothing else, this makes cultural diversity one of its focal concerns.

In this context, I strongly urge university pastoral mission to assume its role in encouraging university students to meet others from different backgrounds, to get to know them and try to understand their attitudes and behaviors in light of their beliefs and cultural heritage and not through one's own egocentrism.

2) Language is without a doubt the first vehicle of culture, through which people convey the substance of their collective conscious and unconscious and reach out to other speakers. Teaching foreign languages at our universities is perhaps not so much an evidence of cultural openness as it is an inevitable and vital compliance with market demands. But language courses could be made into opportunities for exploring the meanings of language; a lens through which we see life in terms of schemes and categories, and appreciate the richness and diversity added by peoples and individuals to their non-native language.

3) Although our institution does not have a history department per se, most programs feature history courses that offer a look into the evolution of particular scientific fields or professions. Theology students, for instance, study the

development of doctrine and liturgy, the history of the Church and philosophy, while media students study the history of communications and the arts ... as all these courses are aimed to promote a multidisciplinary approach to learning.

4) But intercultural dialogue does not only touch on the three abovementioned fields, even though they are taken up in most world literature on the subject of respecting difference.

a) Managing culturally diverse institutions is a key issue in management and administration sciences. It is a prime concern of multinationals that can no longer afford to limit themselves to the study of investment conditions, growth indicators, market demands and legislations governing economic matters when launching a new branch in an unfamiliar community. To maintain productivity and success, they must address the culture of the host country and the particularities of the new employees. They also need to adapt systems and standards in light of these specificities. Of course, the Faculty of Business Administration has a major role to play here.

b) Advertising, too, is closely linked to diversity and dialogue. A commercial for the same brand uses different characters, allusions and esthetic standards according to its target audience. In fact, commercials tend to focus on individual

freedom in liberal societies and on family values in conservative ones; they use subdued, sober colors when addressing the European investor community and bright colors when targeting low-income wage-earners in arid climes overpowered by the drab monotony of color. Therefore, if our students were unequipped with the necessary tools to manage such diversity, their intellectual and professional training would indeed be lacking.

c) The same applies to engineers, health professionals, musicians, teachers and others who are all in daily contact with the carriers of diverse cultural heritages. So, it is in their best interest and it is their duty to listen closely to the soft murmurings of diversity. Otherwise – if they suppress it, ignore it – they would have to face its deafening growls, or they would at least be limiting their human experience by refusing to take part in the adventure that is diversity and dialogue.

# Conclusion

In the last few years, our institution has made great strides toward promoting dialogue as a primary mechanism for decision-making, particularly within individual Faculty Boards and the University Board, as these were given more authority and a wider margin of maneuver to undertake initiatives. Thus, the institution proved, in word and deed, its keen interest in the opinions of each member, its faith in the value of collective institutional thinking.

Our institution, by the very nature of its composition, its diverse faculty, staff and student body – in terms of denomination, social background and gender – is an ideal incubator for cultural dialogue.

But dialogue is not merely the exchange of words, particularly in its intercultural aspect. It is the peaceful and creative interaction that opens in each one's self a multitude of windows onto otherness, expands one's conception of truth and difference, and sows in our mind, soul and will the seeds of human maturity.

So, are we listening intently enough to this daily silent dialogue?

Do we give enough thought to this sturdy thread with which we can weave the fabric of a unified but not uniform Lebanese society?

To each and every one of you I address my warmest wishes of health and success, and to our institution development and prosperity, to our country, destined to be a land of diversity and dialogue, true opportunities to break free of barren debates for the green pastures of dialogue.