



by Silvia Volpi

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# Is **discontent** the first necessity for **progress**?

**The Symposium on Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Youth Work took place in Istanbul, Turkey, between the 27th and 31st of March 2007. It was organised in the framework of the “All different-All equal” European Youth Campaign for Diversity, Human Rights and Participation by the Council of Europe-Directorate of Youth and Sport, Prime Ministry of the Turkish Republic- Directorate General of Youth and Sports, the European Commission and the Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation.**

**This dialogue between Mr. Inter-religious and Ms. Intercultura has been inspired by the comments, evaluations of some of the participants and by the input of the key-note speakers at the Symposium.**

## >> *Mr Inter-religious*

I am completely disappointed! History is repeating itself! After participating in the last international meeting in Istanbul, I had the same feeling as usual. I felt like I was being manipulated.

I had the strange impression I assisted in a sumptuous encounter set up expressly for politicians and university students to promote their own ideas and agendas. Their aim was not to share their ideas and establish a real dialogue with young people and youth workers, but to use the event to give conscience to their power.

## >> *Ms Intercultura*

On the contrary, I think that the aim of the event was to give the chance to everyone to be active and to express his/her own opinion, to share ideas and projects, doubts and fears.

In a way the encounter had the opposite aim, the one to give power to consciences.

## >> *Mr Inter-religious*

Maybe you are right, but I still feel manipulated! It is a matter of fact that Europe wants to use the fashionable issues of intercultural and interreligious dialogue to enter Turkey. The European politicians take part in these international events, only in order to have the chance to re-establish a good relationship with Turkey and to expand their market areas.

## >> *Ms Intercultura*

Well, I have a different opinion about the relationship between Europe and Turkey. First of all I consider that Turkey is

part of Europe even if not yet of the European Union (EU). Second, I think that both Turkey and the EU are interested in developing a good relationship. In fact if I agree with you when you say that EU is interested to expand its market areas throughout Turkey, but I also think that Turkey has gained an advantage by using so called “western technologies” while transforming most of the central Anatolia into an industrial department .

## >> *Mr Inter-religious*

You may be right, but I still have the strong impression that Europeans often want to impose their way of life onto others. For instance, try to think about all the prejudices they have towards our country, a secular country with an important Islamic population. They easily translate Islam into terrorism without knowing a single precept of this religion. They do not know for instance, that our government and its people; with clear Islamic beliefs have accomplished in a few years, much more than the previous ones in terms of women’s rights and economic development . They continue to associate religious people and institutions with those who refuse modernity and development.

## >> *Ms Intercultura*

Actually your example makes me want to say that very often we avoid getting to know each other. In a way we use our stereotypes and prejudices to defend ourselves. Unfortunately sometimes, with the purpose of defending ourselves, we isolate and discriminate against others even in our own community and society.



>> **Mr Inter-religious**

Why are people afraid of those who are different from them? Why do they feel destabilised and insecure when confronted with “the other”? Moreover, why are cultural and religious differences often indicated as the real factors leading to discrimination, exclusion and hatred throughout the world?

>> **Ms Intercultura**

I do not have a precise answer to your questions. I agree with the view of Bauman who says that most of the people seem to feel as though they live, and they probably do live, in “unsicherheit” which means, in German, the complex combination of uncertainty, insecurity and lack of safety. This complex and fairly recent situation brings people to stand in a very defensive position towards “the other”; closing any door for a possible dialogue, reinforcing stereotypes and prejudices and increasing a feeling of distrust and intolerance towards anyone that differs from themselves.

>> **Mr Inter-religious**

The complexity of our societies influences interreligious and intercultural dialogue a lot. It is increasingly more evident that growing intolerance is affecting and challenging our multicultural societies and our way of living together; too often synonymous with indifferent coexistence.

>> **Ms Intercultura**

Do you think that it is possible to live differently?

>> **Mr Inter-religious**

I believe that it is possible to live differently, even if it is not that easy. We should realise and admit our stereotypes and prejudices and also demonstrate our will to challenge them and try to get to know each other and avoid ignorance. Education has a central role in this process as well as the media, governments and religious authorities. All of them need to recognise the diversity of our societies and communities, avoiding manipulation and miscommunication.

>> **Ms Intercultura**

I also think, as Mr. Giuliani says, that we should provide room for a pluralistic vision of the truth. We should accept that, if there is “a truth”, it can show up in the fragmented panorama of different religions, cultures and beliefs.

Living with diversity and continuously negotiating a shared code of conduct may positively influence the process of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and by consequence, our ways of living together.

>> **Mr Inter-religious**

If it is possible to live differently, why is the gap between theory and practice often too big?

>> **Ms Intercultura**

Maybe because dialogue requires time and also because it is a process, we should also be aware that there are “forces” in so-

ciety who have an interest in preventing dialogue and maintaining the gap between theory and practice. In fact in the absence of dialogue, they profit by reinforcing their power.

>> **Mr Inter-religious**

I think that it is also because a strong motivation, will and commitment is needed, of all the parties involved, in order to make dialogue work.

>> **Ms Intercultura**

If there is no motivation to overcome our own prejudices and stereotypes, our own limits to opening our space to the other and challenge our point of view, we risk reinforcing a misperception of reality and prepare the field for a discriminating attitude.

>> **Mr Inter-religious**

You may be right, but I still have the impression that when you do not succeed to establish a real dialogue, despite of all your efforts, you get disappointed and frustrated. Discontent can also lead to reinforcing prejudices and stereotypes and to close the door to anyone that differs from you or to simply give up and complain.

>> **Ms Intercultura**

Well, that is one possibility. But you may consider that discontent for not having achieved a goal often leads people to try again. Discontent is a powerful engine! It urges people to move on, to take action and to work on the issues that are still relevant for their lives.

>> **Mr Inter-religious**

Your point of view is very interesting, but I still believe that there are a lot of obstacles that prevent a real dialogue among people. Do you see any obstacles to interreligious and intercultural dialogue?

>> **Ms Intercultura**

There are some very strong obstacles to interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Some of them are:

- Lack of will, sincere commitment and courage to establish any kind of dialogue or communication
- Lack of mutual recognition especially while speaking about recognition of equal dignity to all religions and beliefs
- Reinforcement of the dichotomy between the absolute self and the absolute other to be able to face the complexity of our lives
- Reconfirmation and reinforcement of reciprocal stereotypes and prejudices even during such international and intercultural events
- Lack of self criticism
- Lack of critical reflections on the past and present realities and on the information spread by media
- Manipulation and misuse of the information and the realities by the media, the institutions, the political parties and every single citizen
- Growing of selfish interests
- Lack of courage to admit that human rights may be a common code to start to understand each other
- Lack of time to listen to each other and to express our own opinion and thoughts carefully

- Lack of time to state our real intentions, without hiding our ideas and thoughts behind a politically correct but empty speech
- Generalisation or superficial “relativisation” of the problems without a serious contextualisation of the issues and analysis of possible alternatives
- Lack of strategies, ideologies and ethics in the political sphere

And you, can you mention any elements that can foster inter-religious and intercultural dialogue?

### >> *Mr Inter-religious*

Of course, I can list several of them, such as:

- Strong will and commitment of any single person
- Less egocentric approach to dialogue, avoiding transforming it into a monologue
- Avoiding generalising and making the effort to contextualise the issue/problem looking for alternatives and solutions
- Recognise equal dignity for every religion and belief, respecting each other
- Look not only at the differences but underline also the similarities between people, cultures, and religions
- Admitting stereotypes and prejudices and looking for ways to know each other better
- Try to avoid wrong assumptions
- Develop a critical perspective of historical facts, with a participatory and collective revision of the history books
- Look carefully at the actual realities and the information received and spread out by media and governments
- Do not worry to love and to be loved: overcome the feeling of insecurity

- Fight for rights with a responsible attitude towards the others
- Use the existing codes of conduct such as human rights to build up dialogue and improve and adapt them to our needs
- Improve and increase mobility, facilities and opportunities, so that people can meet each other and get to know each other better
- Develop and implement projects and activities at grass-root level involving local communities
- Do not speak for the young people but give them the floor more often
- Admit that dialogue is a process that requires time
- Have the courage to tackle and talk about “hot issues”, even if those will lead to disagreement

### >> *Ms Intercultura*

So, what is next in order to improve our way of living together? How can we contribute to a better world in which diversity is richness and in which we do not tend to become a melting pot society in which different identities merge into one?

### >> *Mr Inter-religious*

I believe that it’s important to take the risk and responsibility to continue to talk, think and reflect on the sensitive issue of interreligious and intercultural dialogue and also to transform our thoughts and reflections in coherent initiatives and actions, in which everyone has the real opportunity to get involved.

Dialogue is definitely an opportunity to improve our way of living together, with the final aim to accept each other, even without always reaching an agreement or a consensus.





Similar to the conversation between Ms. Intercultura and Mr. Inter-religious, the symposium in Istanbul offered all the actors an opportunity to share opinions, doubts and fears and even ideas for new projects on inter-religious and intercultural dialogue in youth work. During the encounter, while trying to enter into dialogue with each other, the participants also faced challenges. Discontent, often caused by heartfelt views and a strong desire for consensus, may indeed be the first necessity for progress, the engine to provoke changes!

This is nothing new in the world of non formal and experiential education. With inter-religious and intercultural dialogue however, the challenges are particularly real – a daily struggle for progress. The hope is that the Istanbul Youth Declaration will be genuinely helpful in this struggle both at the local and the international level.

## Facts and Figures of the Symposium on Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Youth Work

### ***The frame...***

The Symposium on Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Youth Work was organised in the framework of the “All different-All equal” European Youth Campaign for Diversity, Human Rights and Participation.

The meeting took place in Istanbul – Turkey, between the 27th and 31st of March 2007 and was co-organised by the Council of Europe-Directorate of Youth and Sport, Prime Ministry of the Turkish Republic- Directorate General of Youth and Sports, European Commission and Islamic Conference Youth Forum for Dialogue and Cooperation.

To hold a symposium on interreligious and intercultural dialogue in youth work in Istanbul had a highly symbolic relevance: Istanbul was in fact the ideal place for this encounter; for its beauty, its richness, its historical and cultural heritage and for being a concrete example of a multicultural and multi-religious society.

### ***The main actors...***

Young people, coming from more than 40 countries were the main actors of the symposium. Representatives of the European Institutions promoting and supporting the event as well as those representing some governments, were also actively involved in the meeting.

The diversity of the participants in terms of geographical provenance, cultural background, ethnic origins, religion and belief, lifestyles and personal histories mirrored current multicultural societies and communities.

### ***The purpose...***

The prime purpose of the symposium was to create an opportunity for young people, their organisations and local, national and international authorities to exchange practices related to interreligious dialogue. The aim was also to propose ways through which interreligious and intercultural dialogue can be further sustained through and as a result of initiatives such as: the “All different-All equal” European

Youth Campaign, the European Union’s Year of Intercultural Dialogue in 2008, the Council of Europe’s White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue and the United Nation’s “Youth for Alliance of Civilisations” initiative.

### ***The rationale and programme of the symposium...***

The programme of the symposium, which alternated plenary sessions and working groups, also took into consideration the following issues:

- the need to give visibility to discrimination issues and how they affect young people today;
- concrete and diverse examples of youth work practice in addressing discrimination and dealing with challenges posed to diversity on a regular basis;
- the possibility to take advantage of the cultural and religious patrimony of Istanbul;
- the need to address general matters while deepening specific issues and concerns.

### ***The main outcomes...***

In terms of quality and quantity the symposium achieved impressive results. A large number of people were reached and actively involved in the symposium. In-depth reflections, relevant analysis of our societies and also a final document setting the frame for further work were produced.

- More than 300 persons attended or participated in organising, managing and facilitating the symposium. More than 200 were young people coming from more than 40 countries.

- In a very short time relevant issues and topics related to interreligious and intercultural dialogue were discussed, reflected upon and elaborated on by the participants and the guest speakers. Such issues included the relation between Turkey and Europe, Religion and Human Rights, Europe



*...taking into account the discussions, fears, doubts and different opinions expressed by the participants during the last session.*

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and multicultural societies, the role of the Media, the role of Education and educational institutions, the role and the possible actions of Institutions and Governments, the role of young people in working towards intercultural and interreligious dialogue..

- 17 working groups were organised to allow the participants to get know each other, to express their expectations and concerns about the symposium and also about the topics of the meeting.

- 12 thematic working groups were organised to give participants the chance to deepen their discussions and share experiences on specific issues such as:

- Armed conflicts and intercultural youth work for conflict transformation
- Faith Based youth work
- Intercultural learning and education for inter-religious and intercultural dialogue
- Migration
- Racism and discrimination
- Religion, Human Rights and Human Rights Education
- Religion, Culture and Gender
- Religious based discrimination
- The Alliance of civilisations initiative
- The consequences of terrorism on inter-religious and intercultural dialogue
- The role of and working with the Media
- The role of local authorities in working on inter-religious and intercultural dialogue

- Thousands of ideas and project proposals were floating in the air during the symposium and it seems, from a first evaluation, that some of them are already on the way to being transformed into concrete actions supporting the interreligious and intercultural dialogue process.

- At the end of the event, the participants created the first draft of the Istanbul Youth Declaration, lately finalised by the organisers. It contains 23 specific articles and recommends the active participation and interaction of different

stakeholders including young people, local, national and international Authorities, Media, Religious Communities, Educational Institutions to support and foster interreligious and intercultural dialogue processes.

Editor’s Note: Unfortunately we do not have the space to print the text of the declaration in the full here. You can find the document at :

[http://www.coe.int/T/dg4/intercultural/Source/Istanbul\\_final\\_EN.doc](http://www.coe.int/T/dg4/intercultural/Source/Istanbul_final_EN.doc)

### Notes and references :



- The original quotation of T. Edison is “Discontent is the first necessity for progress”
- Read the policy research papers “Islamic Calvinists” on [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)
- Read the research “Sex and power in Turkey: Femism, Islam and maturing of Turkish democracy” on [www.esiweb.org](http://www.esiweb.org)
- Z.Bauman “Europe of strangers” page. 7
- M.Giuliani: “Le tende di Abramo” – Edizione Il margine page 68

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