

The Dialogue of Civilizations and Religions

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The dialogue between different civilizations and cultures is a well known practice; it has been practiced between the East and West since antiquity: Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Mycenaea. History has recorded a rich and fruitful dialogue between Phoenicia and Greece. The Romans succeeded in managing a vast field of understanding and acknowledgement of others and of ethno-cultural osmosis.

In the time of the Battle of Tours (732), there was also a real dialogue between the Arab-Muslim East and the Christian West; in this regard, consider two emblematic figures: Haroun Al-Rashid and Charlemagne. In regards to the Middle Ages, we must mention Islamic-Jewish-Christian Andalusia which generated wonders worthy of the seven wonders of the world.

Unfortunately, this intercultural and inter-religious dialogue was, if not halted, at least strongly disrupted by religious wars, particularly by the crusades, although we should however recognize that ethno-cultural movement can be done despite physical walls and anthropological obstacles. Intercultural dialogue was also hampered by the recession of knowledge in the Arab-Islamic world, and especially by the violent expansion of imperialism, particularly in Africa and Asia.

Today, the weaknesses in cultural and religious dialogue are sadly strengthened, to the point of provocation and explosion. Evidence of this can be found in the following:

1. Since their independence, countries in Africa, in the Arab world, in Asia and even in Latin America, maintain an attitude of mistrust and suspicion toward the West.
2. Because of frustration and of the perversion of conscience identity, ethnic groups, prisoners of their respective cultures, are transformed into centers of tension and jealousy, or even violent hostility. It would behoove us to identify and better understand the agents that foster this frustration and these ethno-cultural hostilities.

Conscience identity is certainly a positive factor since it can lead to taking responsibility for one's destiny, and it is used to situate, understand, and acknowledge oneself. But if frustrated, this conscience identity can, alas, harbor indifference, mistrust, misunderstanding, or even contempt and rejection. There are, therefore, demons to ward off. The side or diversion or even the perverse effects of this frustrated conscience identity are sometimes and perhaps most often, of external origin.

All of this is added to other facts with universal resonance. Financial growth due to oil, particularly in the Gulf countries and in Iran, population growth in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America, the fall of the Berlin wall, the collapse of Bolshevism: with the breakup of the Soviet empire, it is the end of the Cold War, certainly, but also the fall of global balance. The two relatively equal powers ensured the maintenance of a precarious balance which enabled other countries to know their place in the world, and to find an ally. This was replaced by an unbalanced world, unilateral, asymmetrical. The two major antagonists were long able to dissuade and neutralize each other. But, the last century ended on a very clear trend toward a one-sided world. Therefore the so-called non aligned groups are in distress, no longer with an alternative point of support.

However, these groups are afraid to disappear in the one-size-fits-all mold proposed, or even imposed, in the name of a certain type of democracy or human values. Trying to curb differences based on a fallacious model creates outbreaks of unrest. There are other

contributing factors to instability: ignorance, poverty, disease, exclusion, illiteracy, absence of values, absence of imagination, unemployment, etc... Those, who feel threatened by the changes taking place, hide themselves behind **their truth**; to preserve, and if needed impose, **their truth**, they can resort to violence including suicide. Exasperated by socioeconomic imbalances, technological and digital imbalances, and by injustices and humiliation, this conscious identity resorts to opposition in order to survive and to get justice.

These are, in our humble opinion, how the worlds of violence, fanaticism, fundamentalism and terrorism are born and develop. The western world, long indifferent to all these phenomena, seems to have become aware of the gravity of the situation after 11 September 2001. Globalization is seen as suspect. More mysterious and more insidious, globalization is perceived as a dangerous phenomenon; this arouses distrust and fear; protectionism; isolationism, because we are under attack. The South doesn't trust the North, because the North makes a mockery of justice and is not embarrassed to use two weights and two measures. The South denounces the duplicity. The South feels assaulted by the contemptuous look of the other party, richer and stronger. The situation is becoming more serious because the tendency is to value material goods at the expense of values and ethics. We should, certainly, regret the reduction of time spent on the human sciences in education, particularly history, philosophy, history of religions, anthropology, linguistics, geography, and many other human sciences, without which, we remain in total ignorance of oneself and of others. This lack of understanding of each other, leads to both envying, admiring and hating the other, or to having contempt, denouncing and perhaps even trying to limit and control the other. To arrogance on the one side, is opposed suspicion and refusal on the other.

Voilà therefore a landscape rather dark and unattractive. There is a danger for all. If the boat capsizes, the disaster is complete, for both the rich and the poor. Therefore, we must find solutions which will lead to a situation creating justice, stability, peace and security. Instead of ignoring and being wary of each other, we should establish a **dialogue among civilizations, religions and cultures**. Mutual understanding and acknowledgement will develop relationships of trust, which can lead to genuine cooperation and develop a sense of solidarity. However, to establish this dialogue, we must begin by valuing what we have in common and by believing in the virtues of solidarity.

Tunisia believes in solidarity: as evidenced by the creation of National Solidarity Fund by a law enacted on December 25, 1995. Tunisia was also a key player in the creation of the World Solidarity Fund, adopted by the United Nations on December 20, 2002.

But how to promote cultural and religious dialogue? The question is quite legitimate. To answer, I would say that it is first important to understand yourself, to acknowledge yourself, and then make yourself known to the other parties in the conversation. This implies a rediscovery of your history and origins, a liberating return to the past. We must then break laws of tradition, neutralize taboos of any kind, and dare to submit to a critical examination of ourselves, in order to retain that which facilitates openness towards others, who must be accepted with respect for their differences without complacency nor condescension.

In addition, you must learn and understand enough about the other party to feel empathy: to know its history, religion, beliefs and everything that makes its uniqueness, while seeking and promoting mutuality beneficial interactions and exchanges.

One can also ask, Why bother with cultural and religious dialogue? In my answer, I would say that dialogue with others is necessary today; because in today's world it is no longer possible to remain isolated-cultures who do not touch and influence each other. We should therefore adopt an attitude where acknowledgement, modesty and generosity combine to induce mutual respect and solidarity: each culture is unquestionably inked and liable to another.

Islam and the Arab world owe their size and their glory to an internal potential, certainly, but also to multiple external influences: Greek, Persian, Hindu, Chinese, African, Berber, Jewish and Christian. Can one understand the Greek miracle without the contributions of the Semitic East and of Egypt? Can one understand the material wealth and cultural of Europe and the West without their expansion in Africa, Asia and pre-Columbian Americas? The debt of the West toward the South seems to me enormous.

One flourishes when he knows how to receive others, how to open up his arms to embrace others with love in complete unity, without losing himself: the golden rule is to be yourself and become yourself without fearing contact and exchanges with others. Communion is accomplished when diversity converges: the Me is then in the other and the other is in the Me. The universal civilization is thus made, the product of ongoing dialogue into perpetuity, dialogue between groups of people over millennia and generations. Civilizations fight each other rarely; but they are subject to the risk of violence. Satan, under the traits of Lucifer, does not yield; we should fear his false light, combat him, and ward him off. It behooves us to take action united with each other in order to live together in justice, peace and solidarity. We must take action so that civilizations understand each other, meet each other, and bring out the best in each other, to the happiness and betterment of all people.

For Tunisia, the structure is already in place. No effort was spared to benefit human values, such as the acceptance of each other along with each one's differences, mutual respect, solidarity, justice, understanding and acknowledgement of oneself and of others, in order to live together.

In accordance with these ideas, the President of the Republic of Tunisia, *Zine El Abidine Ben Ali*, has taken initiatives that promote the dialogue between civilizations, cultures and religions. At the opening of the Mediterranean Symposium, organized jointly by the Tunisian Academy in Carthage and UNESCO, his Excellency delivered a speech, of which follows an excerpt: "at this stage in the changes which are happening at all levels, the world needs, more than ever before, to devote itself to the value of tolerance, to combat selfishness and sectarianism in all cultural, social and economic areas, and to substitute calmness for fear, solidarity for exclusion and marginalization, within both developed societies and other societies. Because tolerance is a fundamental value of civilization, as it represents the focal point for all the ideals of human rights, and represents the foundation well preached by all religions and moral principles enshrined in most philosophical theories. Also, our perception of this value is global, as it is true that we have built our political, economic, social, cultural, and civilizational choices on the concept of tolerance. The latter is, in effect, one of the essential values of our Muslim faith and our social traditions. It constitutes the supreme virtue and one of basic features of the history of Tunisia, which represents a living example of the osmosis of differences in the same system of civilization."

At the end of the Symposium, the participants adopted the Carthage Charter on tolerance, which contains seven main recommendations:

1. The fight against any form of intolerance requires that we raise the freedom, the inviolability of the conscience, at the very basis of human existence, which makes necessary the establishment of democracy, political pluralism, recognition and mutual respect.
2. The right to freedom, under all its forms, requires the existence of a state of law, the function of such a State being to promote an art of living together between persons of different convictions and not just between those of the same beliefs.
3. The existence of intolerable situations created by economic and social inequalities, by unfair international dealings, and by imposed economic policies, requires profound

changes, in order to build an environment that enables human beings to practice tolerance.

4. The long experience of the human race shows clearly that there cannot be peace among humans without peace between political and religious beliefs. Consequently, the three monotheistic religions must promote within, in their mutual relations and in their various groups, the values of freedom, tolerance and human rights.
5. Humanity being one, its fundamental values being identical, any right to be different does not acquire authentic meaning outside of the framework of an aspiration to universality. That is why the diversity of cultures and the multiplication of expressions of the human factors of emulation and mutual enrichment, must not become hindrances to prevent the flourishing in a culture of the values of progress, peace and human brotherhood. Accordingly, no right is transferable; similarly, nor the right of active citizenship, nor that of the practice of democracy, nor that of the exercise of thought and freedom of expression, may be the object of discrimination.
6. Given the ethical nature of these principles, the participants in the Conference of Carthage call The intellectuals, politicians, and officials in the communication networks to do their best to contribute to the promotion of education for tolerance, to the consolidation of the values of freedom and respect for human rights, by spreading a culture of human fraternity.
7. The participants, taking note of new initiatives undertaken by various parties to promote dialogue between different countries, call on all the good will to do more to consolidate peace; tolerance and cooperation between all peoples.

This appeal to dialogue for peaceful relations and solidarity between peoples, generated concrete proposals presented by the President of the Republic of Tunisia, *Zine El Abidine Ben Ali*, at the opening of the 13th International Symposium on the migration problem in the Mediterranean, which took place in Tunis on November 3, 2001. His Excellency stressed that: **“the Mediterranean was, for centuries, a way of crossing and communication between peoples, and at the same time a privileged space for the cross-fertilization of the many cultures and civilizations which existed on its shores, thus favoring the coexistence of different races, religions and languages and accustoming its peoples to multi-cultural contact and intermixing. The Mediterranean being the natural common space of coastal countries, we had, he adds, advocated, in 1990, to make this sea a bridge of dialogue, understanding and cooperation between its shores. We were, as well, the first country on the south shore of the Mediterranean to sign an association agreement with the European Union, to strengthen these relations and enrich the efforts of solidarity development and for the common progress of our peoples.”**

Among the presidential initiatives in favor of moderation and balance, of individuals and of society, the Tunis Forum for Peace was created, a space of scientific and intellectual meetings intended to ensure the monitoring of efforts to establish the value of peace and to work toward the dissemination of the culture of peace, to anchor these principles in thinking and action, and to present an authentic image of Islam, with its noble precepts which teach moderation, tolerance and the rejection of all forms of closure, bigotry, violence and extremism.

In addition, the Tunis Declaration for Peace was made at the end of the International Conference on Islam and Peace, which took place in Tunis from April 15-17, 2003. This statement condemns terrorism in whatever form and manifestation; it urges international and regional institutions and organizations to serve the cause of peace and security in the world, and to redouble their efforts to the achievement of objectives enshrined in their charters and conventions; it calls on educational institutions and cultural forums to root the culture of

peace particularly among young people through curricula, and educational and cultural programs that aim for the acknowledgement of others and the acceptance of all on the basis of mutual respect.

But to ensure continuing success of cultural and religious dialogue, the President of the Republic of Tunisia, **Zine El Abidine Ben Ali**, considered it necessary to create an ad-hoc University Chair, called upon to promote this noble mission. This institution, which I have the honor to Chair, was created on November 7, 2001 within Tunis University at El Manar. Its mission is to work for the creation of links of friendship, cooperation and reciprocal esteem between peoples, whatever their races, cultures and religions. It is a philosophy of openness, solidarity between peoples, and acknowledgement of identities and uniqueness, without exclusions. It is underpinned by a humanism which acknowledges others, respects others, and accepts others with their differences. It is worth mentioning that this philosophy is deeply rooted in Tunisia. It relates to a very old tradition which continues to flourish and to increase from the Carthage of Hannibal, Tertullian, and Augustin, to our days, in passing by the founder of Sadiki, Kheireddine Pacha, and Tahar Haddad, who did not hesitate to defend the rights of women at a time when speaking of women was perceived as blasphemous. It was taboo. **The Ben Ali Chair for the Dialogue of Civilizations and Religions** therefore has the purpose of cultivating the friendship, cooperation, tolerance and solidarity among peoples.

We must add two other institutions designed to strengthen the arsenal put in place for the benefit of intercultural dialogue and a better understanding of others. The Center of Research and Studies on the Dialogue of Comparative Civilizations and Religions was created on June 27, 2005. It is placed under the co-supervision of the Ministry of Higher Education and the Department of Religious Affairs. Its headquarters is based in Sousse. There is also the National Translation Center, created by presidential decree on January 3, 2008. This same year was proclaimed the National Year of Translation. In doing so, his Excellency **Zine El Abidine Ben Ali** has translated, in the interest of Tunisia, everything which facilitates the harmonious relations between peoples, whatever the ethnic groups, languages and faiths. Tunisia may therefore present itself to others with reciprocal understanding and acknowledgement and mutual respect.

But what about inter-religious dialogue? In this field, a genuine dialogue implies taking into account the following information:

1. The three Abrahamic religions share a common base: Abraham, the semitic legacy, or rather Egyptian-semitic.
2. The three religions and others present themselves as religious fact; that is worth understanding and acknowledging with the greatest empathy and a high consideration: any management of society must take this into account. There is no society without religion. This is a fact to acknowledge and consider in the management of society.
3. Religion is a tool to allow access to the sacred, which all humans seek since the beginning of time: I would like to mention, to this point, the religious experience of a Neanderthal community which, 50,000 years ago, in El-Guettar, in Southwest Tunisia, not far from a natural water source, erected a tumulus to pay tribute to the Power responsible for this miracle without which life would have been impossible. At the sacred level, humans of all times and heavens meet.

According an old sumerian-accadien myth, Adam is made from clay mixed with the flesh and blood of a young god. Dynamic and sparkling with intelligence. Might this already be the incarnation.

It should also emphasized that, if the sacred is part of the structure of life, religion is presented as a way to frame the sacred for humans. It is therefore circumstantial; one is

In that context one may infer that being Jewish, Christian and Islamic are only religious facts. They have nothing to do with ethnicity. Being Jewish is not a race. Jewish conversion has existed from Antiquity: the Himyarite kingdom of Yemen was, at a given time of its history, of the Jewish faith. There were Jewish Arab tribes including Yathreb, the current Medina, City of the prophet Mohamed. There were also Jewish Berber tribes, from Antiquity: the Jeraoua of the Aurès, the Jews of Jerba and from southern Tunisia are native peoples whose ancestors were Hebrew.

In Tunisia, there is a Jewish necropolis in Gammarth which dates back to Roman times with tombstone structures similar to those seen in the Holy Land.

We must therefore avoid this common error, which makes being Jewish a race. There are Tunisians of Jewish religion, Spanish of Jewish religion, Slavs of Jewish religion, etc. That is what which confirms the history of Jewish conversion. But this does not exclude the Diaspora, nor voluntary migration: in a Carthaginian tomb from the end of the 7th or 6th century B.C. was found a ring which the epigraph was, according to specialists, Palestinian Hebrew.

It would go against historical reality if one considers being Jewish as a simple race. This perception has been at the origin of monstrous errors and of unpardonable atrocities. It is the same for Islam and being Arab: it is not of race. The Arabs of the North Africa have nothing to do with an Arab race; their overwhelming majority are North Africans that now speak Arabic and share common cultural threads. For Islam, the fact is even more evident: between a North African Muslim and a Malaysian or Bangladeshi Muslim, there are enormous differences.

The inter-religious dialogue is therefore to act in a manner of acceptance of the legitimacy of these differences and of these characteristics, acknowledging that they belong to the faith, or they relate to worship and the tradition. The dialogue does not aim for either dispute or syncretism (the joining of two seemingly contradictory ideas or beliefs). It is to understand and acknowledge each other such as we are, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, Muslims or other, without condescension. In this connection, the dialogue is a practical exercise, an education: we must learn to rejoice in the religious differences of each other because it is a source of wealth. To achieve this, we must promote the culture of interreligious dialogue.

These paramount principles retained, there remains, for a true dialogue between religions, a prerequisite that to me seems fundamental. It can be presented in the form of seven commandments:

- a/ No proselytism.
- b/ No anathema.
- c/ No religion is superior to another.
- d/ Everyone has the right to worship whom he wants.
- e/ No one has access to the absolute truth.
- f/ The profane cannot contain the Sacred.
- g/ Everyone has the right to be agnostic or even atheist.

To achieve these noble objectives, strongly related to knowledge and the dissemination of knowledge, it is necessary to work for a deep understanding of all peoples, their civilizations and religions, on the basis of investigations which duly designed and carried out, covering the different areas of knowledge, whether it is of man or whether it is of life and nature. *The Ben Ali Chair* has the principal task to encourage the attainment of these investigations, to support them, to refer to them, and to disseminate the results.

To convince others and acquire legitimacy as a speaker, one must first know one's own history and culture, without any preconceived notions and any tendency to be selective. This good understanding of oneself (man and environment), provides the office responsible for the management of this and the perception of the future, a basis for reflection and a source of inspiration.

Based on these principles, *the Ben Ali Chair* develops a program that promotes contacts, the dissemination of knowledge, debate in an environment conducive to freedom of expression, far from taboos, and animated with trust and mutual respect. The program can change from one year to another while remaining faithful to the objectives. It can therefore include conferences made by Tunisian or foreign personalities on subjects which deal with the past and present or future, the objective being a good understanding of oneself and of others. We examine the past to better manage our present and design our future. Solid construction requires three supportive components: knowledge, memories and hope, that is to say, the faith in the man and the cult of the human being.

In all objectivity, Tunisia presents herself by publicizing its achievements and its legitimate ambitions for the construction of a balanced society, democratic, open and confident in the future because based on knowledge and values such as justice and respect for human rights in their totality.

Conferences can be made in Tunisia, or in another country without exclusion, within the framework of a partnership with a university or other entity that works for the dialogue between the peoples and cultures.

In addition to lectures, *the Ben Ail Chair for the Dialogue of Civilizations and Religions* organizes meetings which allow personalities and experts from East or West, Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia and Europe to exchange views and debate on subjects related with either history or with a topical question, be it national or international, cultural, historical, scientific or religious and in the hope of bringing some light to the subject, and to contribute to the discovery of what would facilitate cooperation and agreement.

Furthermore, *the Ben Ali Chair* remains willing to participate in any cooperative arrangement with any university or cultural association or institution, whether national or foreign, provided that it is desirous of promoting the dialogue between the peoples and cultures of everywhere, and of all time periods, languages, denominations. It works constantly with all entities, who work in favor of solidarity between peoples, peace for all, security in the world, the rights of humankind and happiness on earth where-ever and whatever it is.

Among other projects, we could for example evoke the countries of the Mediterranean, which have a common past, covering centuries, from the proto-history up to the contemporary era. The colonial difficulties must be taken into account, without hate and without complex. It is the history of the Mediterranean which gave rise to the three major Abrahamic religions! Issues of a common core, these three branches share the same roots. Carthage, Athens, Rome and their respective heirs united their efforts so that the Mediterranean brought offerings and was the cradle of a civilization full of many splendors, free from racism, fanaticism, and exclusion. Baghdad, Kairouan and Cordoba picked up where they left off. Let us ensure that the Mediterranean remains a land of encounter, exchanges and multiple wealth for all humankind in the present and future.

Must we not design programs of history and religious history for all young people, so that they would feel inter-connected and invited to use their common past and their achievements in the service of a common present and future, made of justice, peace, friendship, cooperation, cohabitation, solidarity and reciprocal esteem? What a beautiful dream! But with the willingness of men and women, nothing is impossible. It is necessary that this dialogue generates practical projects. For the design and the implementation of these

projects, we must reflect together. The task is complex and requires the combination of both faith and reason. To succeed in this grandiose project, we must all believe and take action.