Seminar
The Challenges and Opportunities
of a Multicultural Society
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Session I

Intercultural Dialogue in Multicultural Societies

The term 'multicultural' is used to describe the reality of cultural diversity in our society. It is not simply descriptive, but also expresses a recognition of diversity. Such recognition can go beyond description and appreciate diversity, as opposed simply to describing a society as mono-cultural or of according a privileged position to one cultural identity over the others. The term 'multiculturalism' signifies this recognition.

However, 'multi' means many; it does not necessarily help capture relations amongst diverse cultures in a society. It is, therefore, necessary to use the term 'intercultural' in recognizing the utmost significance of the relational and communicative aspects of the reality of a multicultural society. Acknowledging, in a formal way (constitutionally and legally), that a society is multicultural is the basis of equality in terms of cultural diversity. Such recognition can provide diverse communities with constitutional and legal mechanisms to guarantee their rights against discrimination based on their specific cultural identities. This can be called functional inclusivity, which is the legal minimum, and is similar to establishing gender and other types of equality.

Nevertheless, diverse cultural identities do not exist in the abstract; they are intrinsically interwoven with specific worldviews, meanings, social relationships, and economic and political factors, which impact locally, nationally, and globally. For this reason, functional inclusivity is necessary, but not sufficient. There is a need to engage with the 'substance' of specific cultures and with the ways in which they give meaning to their identities. Hence, there is a need for intercultural dialogue to help develop deeper understanding of differences in beliefs and practices, even in politics. In societies which formally recognize multiculturalism there remain serious tensions among the diverse communities, and these contribute to far-right political tendencies. Without intercultural dialogue a society cannot contain such dangerous developments.

Moreover, a multicultural society cannot advance itself in terms of its cultural and social capital (including its political capital), if the richness of diversity is not self-consciously recognized, understood, celebrated, and lived through an ongoing process of

intercultural dialogue. This requires a level of political maturity on the part of political leadership to envision and imagine beyond the stance of functional inclusivism. If we operate mainly in a mode of crisis management, it is not possible to move beyond functional inclusivity which is itself in crisis due to different political forces. Through intercultural dialogue we come to know the specificities of each other – and ourselves – and are in a position to evaluate them and so mutually correct each other. There are commonalities as well as differences. Complementarity can be one of the ways of responding to differences. Sometimes we must accept, or even love differences as part of a bigger picture that we can create together.

The way in which we respond to diversity depends on two kinds of politics: the politics of fear or the politics of hope. Should difference be perceived always as something frightening or hostile? Difference means unfamiliarity, not hostility; and difference can be encountered with either the politics of fear or the politics of hope. The politics of fear perceives difference as a threat, whereas the politics of hope imagines this encounter as an opportunity for growth, advancement, and resourcefulness. The politics of fear does not emerge simply because of difference, but due to certain socioeconomic and political configurations in a society formed by state policies and practices. The current housing crisis is one of the issues which is at the heart of rising anti-migrant rhetoric in this country. The slogan expressing concern about 'protecting our women from the unknown men' clearly reflects the fears of a patriarchal society. The politics of hope, on the other hand, does not arise simply because of the inherent beauty of cultural diversity, but results from conscious and reflective efforts on the part of political leadership to change the social conditions that generate the politics of fear. For example, a purely market-driven housing strategy is bound to create social tensions leading to the formation of extremist nationalist political forces that call for the tightening of borders. Intercultural dialogue cannot be advanced without taking these social and political factors seriously. Cultures are not static; they are fluid and dynamic and they are constantly reshaping themselves. States, in contrast, are static and territorialized. Cultures can become toxic when state policies and practices closely identify with a single culture, and so diminish its potential to be fluid.

This honoring of difference is something we find expressed across religious and cultural borders. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote: 'Difference does not diminish us. Instead, it enlarges our human possibilities.' And Mahmood Darwish, the most celebrated Palestinian poet, stated that he treats the Torah and the Bible as classics with which he is very familiar, just like the Quran.

Session II

Intercultural Dialogue in Education

What is the goal of our education? Is it to produce nuts and bolts for a technocratic mega-machinery? Technology advances human progress, like the computer enhances the

mind, the telescope expands the range of our sight, etc. But, without self-reflexivity, technocracy stifles human creativity.

Is education a means of giving knowledge? Or of raising awareness and reaching realization? Often knowledge has been imparted in a way that objectifies and compartmentalizes reality. Economics has been separated from ecology, physics from philosophy, history from historiography, politics from poetry, law from ethics, etc. As a result, we have businessmen and women, engineers and technicians who do not care for the earth, lawyers who have no ethics, politicians who do not know poetry – and *vice versa*.

It is necessary to harness the cognitive with the affective, or head with heart, in education and this means cultivating self-reflexivity. It is one thing to objectify reality or even to analyze critically a society, but it is another thing to ask the question 'where am I in this analysis?', or "where are we?' Reality-checks need to be accompted by self-checks. That is education.

Sadly, this emphasis is missing both in the content and the structure of our education system.

In terms of intercultural communication and studying cultures, the religions – in particular – have been objectified in our syllabi. It is one thing to have a textbook understanding of a religion, it is another thing to be aware of the ways in which a believer who belongs to that faith looks at life and world.

There are three approaches to learning about the other:

1. We talk *about the other*: Who are we? Who is the other? In this approach these questions do not matter. We have a preconceived position, often forged by the politics of fear. This has contributed to conflicts and has even justified violence and war, supported by exclusivist interpretation of cultural identifies, where religious identifies have been converted into political identities banishing righteousness from religion. Violence is not only what we do to the other physically but is also found in the very construction of the other as other. The fear of the other is predicated on a total separation of the self and the other.
2. We talk *about them*: In response to the first approach, there is also a secular pluralist approach (which is not necessarily anti-religious) which objectifies religion, but there is no self-critique of what it means by 'secular'. In this, there is a secular-religious binary where secular is seen as inherently superior to the religious.
3. We talk *about ourselves*: This is an alternative to 1 and 2, where we self-reflexively communicate with one another accepting our differences, sharing our diverse conditionings, mutually correcting each other and exploring the possibilities of enhancing relationships.

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