A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

INTERRELIGIOUS AND INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN AREA DURING A PERIOD OF GLOBALIZATION

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The conflicts in which the Mediterranean has often been embroiled have not prevented constant contacts and exchanges between its different populations. In the new North-South configuration, it is a place where new equilibria are gradually emerging in the wake of the collapse of the bipolar order.

On almost all its shores, at a time of globalization, there is a passionate desire for group allegiance, identity and ‘roots’ which at times resembles a resurgent tribalism or rather neotribalism, encouraging withdrawal into one’s own specific cultural identity and producing anything from ‘ghettoization’ and its attendant xenophobia to social exclusion and racism. Fiercely resistant to globalization and cultural ‘uniformization’, neotribalism is obliged to target people rather than systems, effects rather than causes. It is a manifestation of rejection and offers no alternative solutions. This inability often nurtures an ideology of resignation which regards globalization as a fatality, an irreversible process governed by hidden forces and endowed with an almost magical power.

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Somewhere between the fine words advocating internationalism, stressing interdependence and playing down power relations and those advocating particularism, stressing a specific cultural identity and focusing attention on frontiers, interreligious and intercultural Mediterranean dialogue, whether seen as Euro-Arab or Islamic-Christian, is seeking a new paradigm which will make the existing situation intelligible and give hope and a sense of purpose to those men and women who wish to work together and think through their common future.

Education, which in all its forms supports and facilitates this dialogue, is thus grappling with the questions that it throws up. We shall address some of these questions.

Globalization, homogenization and difference

Globalization is a multi-faceted process of technical, economic, social and cultural transformation that upsets the internal equilibria of regions and individual nations.

This process strengthens a complex system of tightly woven interdependent relations in which networks are replacing territories and the State is simply a vast legal, bureaucratic and financial engineering system working to improve economic performance and commercial competitiveness. The State is decreasingly the political expression of the public interest. Governments are said to have become too small to deal with major problems and too big to deal with minor ones.

The globalization of the economy and communication is said to herald, in some sense, the death of politics. Whilst economic logic urges 'globalization', interdependence and regional integration, political logic is leading towards the fragmentation of the State. The process does not involve a decline in nationalist feelings. It has to be acknowledged that the world market and the universal *homo economicus* do not dispel ethnic particularism, whether within nations or at the supranational level.

The paradox of globalization, with the development of the consumer society and the global entertainment industry, is that in homogenizing and standardizing it makes the need for distinction and recognition more acute. The more individuals—and peoples—are alike, the more they seek to emphasize their differences. The smaller the actual differences, the more their importance is exaggerated. It seems that to deny one's resemblance to another is the key to remembering a long forgotten difference.

Thus, the first task of any fruitful dialogue would be to be more aware of the tendency to over-emphasize differences between oneself and the other person. The views of communities in Bosnia and Lebanon, to name only two conflict-ridden countries, of themselves and their differences with the other community are an illustration of this. The over-emphasis of the Islamic origins of Muslims in Europe after having long played them down is another example.

Religious pluralism and