Afterword

Since we organized the international workshop that inspired this volume at the University of Ottawa on Cultural dialogues, religion and communication in October 2009, the challenges to achieve more understanding and cooperation between different faiths and cultures have grown. However, some events could be a sign for hope. For example, the election of the first Latin American Pope, Francisco, in March 2013, could be the first important movement towards a power shift in the Catholic Church from its European centric domination to a more universal and maybe horizontal organization. But it is still too early to predict the future course of events. Also, the idea of promoting an alliance of civilizations, in opposition to a “clash of civilizations,” is now a United Nations project with some minor but interesting accomplishments such as the World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development, a global campaign “aimed at engaging people around the world to Do One Thing to support Cultural Diversity and Inclusion” (UNAOC, 2013).

Yet the hurdles are still enormous. While we are writing this postscript in August 2013, an explosion of violence announces an uncertain future for Egypt. The civil war in Syria seems endless. In Tunisia the tensions between the government, claiming to defend a religious ideology, and the secular opposition, are punctuated with episodes of violence and street manifestations. Lebanon is also facing difficult moments to assure the fragile coexistence between different communities and groups. In Israel and Palestine a peace agreement looks as an improbable reality.

All these conflicts are interwoven in a network of geopolitical interests and calculations. They are also rooted in religious divisions between different mindsets and aspirations. Some of the actors are pushing for more fundamentalist options. Some others are for what they call a more secularist way. Some would like a moderate, middle ground path that will be able to reconcile the religious and secular point of views. The causes and reasons invoked by all the parties are varied and complex. What clearly emerges though is the lack of awareness, ability, and skills of all the actors to articulate a dialogue, to communicate, and eventually to engage in a social conversation that can substitute the vicious cycle of violence.

There is also the images that these conflicts are projecting. A certain western public exposed to media reports about the violence in the Middle East, may conclude that the images of bloodshed, state repression, terrorist attacks are the confirmation that there is a “clash of civilizations,” not only between the opposing East and West but also within the East. A more critical view, inspired by Saïd’s (1979/1994) conceptualization of “orientalism,” will reject this simplistic and biased interpretation, saying that the West, particularly the media and the cultural industries, impose the gaze of the oppressor over a very caricaturized representation of the oppressed. Thus, communication between the “different sides” remains difficult, facing the obstacles of prejudice and suspicion constantly cultivated by media representations and discourses focused on confrontation.
Beyond these major global events there are the local dynamics shaping the routine of coexistence between communities all over the world. In the Canadian context, particularly in the province of Québec, these challenges and opportunities were accounted in detail by the historian Gérard Bouchard and the philosopher Charles Taylor in their report of the Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences (Bouchard & Taylor, 2008). They defined the events leading to the establishment of such a Commission as a “crisis of perception” highly influenced, among other factors, by the “exceptionally intensive nature of the media coverage accorded [to] reasonable accommodation…” (p.16). To overcome this “crisis” that nourished many misperceptions and distortions, the Commission engaged in a long and intensive consultation process. After reading 900 briefs submitted by the public and discussing them with authors in 328 hearings, listening to the testimonials of 241 individuals, and taking into account the opinions expressed by people visiting the commission website (p. 7), Bouchard and Taylor produced a report that is an exemplary case of a major dialogue and communication initiative about religious and cultural diversity.

One of the contributions of this report to the discussion about interfaith and intercultural dialogue is to have clarified some concepts, such as multiculturalism and interculturalism, concepts that have guided the policies of accommodation and integration of new immigrants not only in Canada, but also in the US, the UK, and Australia, among other countries. By framing the Québec policy as intercultural, instead of the Canadian multicultural approach, the commissioners wanted to emphasize the “spirit of reciprocity” and “interaction, in particular intercommunity action, with a view to overcoming stereotypes and defusing fear or rejection of the Other, taking advantage of the enrichment that stems from diversity, and benefiting from social cohesion” (Bouchard & Taylor, p.40).

Another highlight of this report resides in the acknowledgement that any process of social integration should overcome the polarized duality of “us” and “them”:

*Members of the majority ethnocultural group, i.e. Quebeckers of French-Canadian origin, like the members of ethnocultural minorities, accept that their culture will be transformed sooner or later through interaction.* (Bouchard & Taylor, p.41)

Even though this statement seems self-evident, at least from a sociological and anthropological perspective, it introduced in the public debate the idea that historically there is no such thing as a “pure culture” or a “pure ethnocultural group.” All cultures are the result of a fuzzy process of mixture and changes called interactive acculturation (Bourhis et al., 1997) that ends up generating some form of “hybrid culture” (Canclini, 1995). It is maybe here that communication, as an interpersonal, intergroup, institutional and mediated dynamic, could contribute to overcome the dangerous illusion of a singularity that makes a particular group, clan, nation or religion more important or truthful. Opening the doors to the interaction and dialogue among those who are different has enriched humanity and will continue to do so. We hope this volume modestly contributes to promote the reflection about better ways of achieving coexistence and peace.

Isaac Nahon-Serfaty  
*University of Ottawa, Canada*

Rukhsana Ahmed  
*University of Ottawa, Canada*
REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1 The supposed initiative of the Québec’s government to pass a bill of “religious neutrality” of the state was leaked to the media and prompted a public debate in the province and the rest of Canada towards the end of August 2013. The bill would ban religious symbols such as Muslim head coverings, Jewish kippas, Sikh turbans, and “ostentatious” personal crucifixes from schools, hospitals, daycares and other public sector institutions, in the name of ensuring religious neutrality. Here is the Editorial from *The Gazette* of Montreal about the subject: http://www.montrealgazette.com/news/Editorial+should+identity+trial+balloon/8821465/story.html