

## Higher Education “as” Free Dialogue: Pedagogy in a Global Age

*by Edward J. Alam, IAU International Conference 2009, Notre Dame University, Lebanon , 4-6 November 2009*

Many will argue that higher education has a major role to play today in fostering a culture of dialogue and understanding. But unless higher education itself is transformed “into” a culture of dialogue, I’m afraid it has little chance of playing such a role. Thus, in my title, “Higher Education ‘as’ Free Dialogue: Pedagogy in a Global Age”, I put the emphasis on the “as”. Such transformation is a daunting task because although it is trendy and perhaps even fashionable to talk about the importance of interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue, the reality, in all but a few institutions of higher education around the globe, especially in the West, is that specialization and departmentalization on both the disciplinary and cultural levels continue to intensify. Specialization is so intense today that people in the same discipline can not even converse. Where does that leave interdisciplinary conversation? This tendency is in some ways, perhaps, inevitable and in some ways advantageous, but the challenge is to achieve accuracy and efficiency in the “particular” branches of knowledge, without giving up the search for the whole, or dare we say, without searching and re-searching for “holiness”. By “holiness” I do not mean some petrified, static notion of religious piety that uncritically dismisses all of Enlightenment thought, or irrationally condemns all forms of secularity as a sign of a disintegrating and corrupt civilization. Not at all! This rather is what Jürgen Habermas calls the “pathos of religion”. Genuine holiness, rather, involves the search for the whole—the whole truth about the whole person living in the whole cosmos. Of course, this search is unending and calls for re-search again and again. And it must involve, as I’ve indicated, the whole person, not just reason, since we have learned in the last century that pure instrumental, reductive reason has its own dangerous “pathos”. And finally it must involve a search for the whole truth in the context of the search for the singular and endlessly varied concrete truths. It was not by accident that the great centers of learning in ancient and medieval times were called “universities”, a study of the universe in a universe of studies.

Now the challenge to hold the “singular” just in the right tension with the “universal” is as old as Philosophy itself, as we see in the tension between Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics—a tension that has pedagogical reverberations down through the ages right up to the present. But despite this tension, both approaches concur on a central point: the need to have a unifying science, what in the Middle Ages was called a “Queen of the Sciences”. Of course, it is impossible to return to such a conception, nor is it desirable given the genuine progress (though I would argue much exaggerated) that has come from specialization as it grew out of the eighteenth century German Enlightenment, but the point is that without a central, unifying science, or what might be called a highest science, unity in the curriculum is impossible. And without a unity and wholeness in the curriculum that facilitates genuine dialogue among members of the faculty from the same disciplines, there can never be the kind of interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogue that is so urgent in our global age.

I have stated above that the turn to specialization has advantages and that in some ways the philosophical shift which anchors this move was, perhaps, inevitable. I say “in some ways” and “perhaps” because, viewed from another angle, the shift was not inevitable at all. As far as the West is concerned, Francis Bacon, the father of modern science, could have chosen an altogether different path to take in his interpretation of Aristotelian logic and epistemology. Likewise, René Descartes, the father of modern philosophy, could have approached Aristotelian metaphysics quite differently than he did. The obvious rejoinder here is “well if Bacon and Descartes had not taken these new directions”, others surely would have. But this is highly disputable and nearly impossible to defend. At any rate, the point here is that the shift from a more robust to a more restricted and myopic approach to knowledge, which has its foundations in 16<sup>th</sup> century England and 17<sup>th</sup> century France, and which reduced philosophy primarily to epistemology, thereby radically changing the very definition of knowledge prevalent in ancient and medieval times, and sought knowledge in order to “master nature” in Bacon’s own terms, was not simply inevitable. The development of thought develops in certain ways because of thinkers who make choices that are not determined from the outset. If this were not the case, our meeting here would be pointless, as what we are trying to do is to move higher education in a certain direction—in a direction of genuine intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue—we could have very well chosen a different direction.

I would like to turn briefly then to the ways of cultivating a cosmic vision, but without ignoring or downplaying just how important specialization and the modern scientific method has been and still is. Again, this modern quandary is an old and perennial metaphysical problem that will never go away, and it never should go away, as it is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be explored and lived, the mystery, that is, of seeing, and holding in the right tension, what the great medieval philosopher, scientist, and statesman, Nicholas of Cusa, called the different and dynamic levels of unity—the mystery of the whole in the parts and the parts in the whole, which, for our present purposes, applies not only to the various colleges (departments, faculties) making up the university, but also to the various nations or cultures that constitute our global world. Today, the success of interdisciplinary education depends directly on the success of intercultural education and vice versa. It is crucial to see this. And there are more and more academics and politicians and religious leaders who do see it; we heard yesterday during Professor Zaragoza’s excellent key note address all about the tremendous progress in this regard: the world wide attention to dialogue in 1998, and then to peace in 1999; to culture in 2000 and to culture diversity in 2001, and since then, the many clear, high level statements on the importance of interreligious and intercultural dialogue, which has led to so many common statements about common universal values from so many diverse cultures and religions. And just last month, our own President of Lebanon called upon the United Nations to designate Lebanon as a center for inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. But, as Professor Zaragoza rightly said, seeing it, though a crucial first step, is not enough, it must be achieved; it is time for action. And the university must play a key role in this regard. Now the fact that so many different people from so many different parts of the world, and from so many different academic disciplines, have come here to Lebanon and gathered at NDU to discuss this theme is a notable action, and is an achievement which must be acknowledged, to say nothing of the excellent themes and

description of the conference which are all so appropriate, but once again, how do we proceed from here? What do we do when we return to our own countries, our own departments, our own disciplines and specializations? There is no one answer here, no ultra-rigorous, super-scientific method for achieving things as profound as unity in knowledge and community among nations, for such unity and community must encompass diversity and individuality, but the following general prescription, which has guided the work of the organization I represent today, the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy<sup>1</sup>, which is now housed here at NDU, may help. I will take this opportunity to invite those so inclined to discover more about our work, which has been promoting inter-cultural dialogue in higher education across the globe for the last 30 years, the written fruits of which are freely available in the 220 volumes from all corners of the world that are published on our website.

The first guiding principle in the work of this Research Council, as the name indicates, is research. Research, that is to say, however, in values and philosophy, which, we contend, is the most fundamental kind of research—perhaps a strange claim, given the way the scientific method has come to usurp the meaning of research—a method that still tends toward a reductive and restrictive epistemology despite the epistemic breakthroughs in 20<sup>th</sup> century physics. And this is not to mention the practical side of this reductionist impetus at the heart of so much of this one-sided research—another point alluded to by Professor Zaragoza in his key note address yesterday. I am speaking, of course, about the obscene amount of money made available for so-called free research being conducted today in the best universities in the world that is driven simply by the production of more and more sophisticated weapons of mass and indiscriminate murder, weapons that we here in Lebanon unfortunately know all too well about. Re-search in the natural sciences must be set free from the slavery of this corrupt and brutal power, for if the universities cannot free themselves from the interests of unbridled market forces, so much of which is connected to the weapons industry, then there is little hope that the university can fulfill its timeless mission of free research into what matters most: values, culture, philosophy, religion.

In any case, it is clear to me that the very same science responsible for an essential change in our understanding of man and the world can never provide the metaphysical foundations necessary for genuine intercultural dialogue. If dialogue does not eventually lead to the search and re-search for what is ontologically good, and true, and beautiful, and is not engaged in ethical activity of discovering why one ought to *do* the good, or *search* for truth, or *desire* the beautiful, then it is not genuine dialogue. Needless to say, the method necessary for such research cannot ignore the achievements of modernity and late modernity, but it seems wise, following the groundbreaking work of the great phenomenological tradition in Western philosophy, from Edmund Husserl to Hans Georg Gadamer via Martin Heidegger, to admit that the road we have been following, the road of instrumental reason and utilitarian ethics, the road of “mastering nature” has gone as far as it can go; to pursue it further will lead to total destruction. One great success that phenomenology has already had, by going back to the original point of departure, is the way it has cultivated a more robust and unified sense of reason in natural law theory.

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<sup>1</sup> For information on the history and activity of this organization, see [www.crvp.org](http://www.crvp.org)

One encouraging result has been a new expression of *human rights* that distances itself from the deistic and rationalistic presuppositions operative in earlier right documents. This new expression, embodied in the Universal Declaration, is “incomprehensible without the presupposition that the human being *qua* human being, is the subject of rights and that the human being bears within itself values and norms that must be discovered—but not invented.”<sup>2</sup> When we lose sight of this insight, we also lose sight of the fact that human beings have rights only because they have duties, and that both rights and duties are rooted in a unified individual human nature which is ordered to participate progressively in greater and greater dimensions of unity in families, communities, cultures, and religions. Upon such foundations, it is possible to conduct intercultural dialogue—the aim of which must be to cultivate a global culture—but not one in which diversity disappears—but one rather in which diversity and individuality are not perceived as threats, but as unique complementary and irreplaceable living cells of the one global body. It sounds idealistic because it is, and too often falls prey to the temptation of ideology—even the ideology of dialogue itself runs this risk. Recently, in fact, not a few have written about the “dialogue industry,” which turns the call to dialogue itself into a multi-million dollar industry—just another cog in the market forces of unbridled capitalism. But dialogue cannot be for its own sake; ex-change of ideas across academic disciplines and across cultures must, as the word itself indicates, lead to change or it is not a genuine ex-change at all. And such dialogue cannot be compulsory through some kind of broad based curriculum shift that is imposed from the top down—even in the name of an important and meaningful concept such as dialogue. No. Dialogue must be chosen freely, and it must spring from the deepest resources present in the cultural and religious heritages of the peoples involved. The very concept of a United Nations presupposes this kind of dialogue, and it was a remarkable achievement of the last century when this concept took flesh after the horrendous years of war, but as Pope Benedict has forcefully stated in his most recent encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, it is imperative that this organization now be reformed: he writes, and with this I will close, “In the face of the unrelenting growth of global interdependence, there is a strongly felt need, even in the midst of a global recession, for a reform of the *United Nations Organization*, and likewise of *economic institutions and international finance*, so that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth. One also senses the urgent need to find innovative ways of implementing the principle of the “*responsibility to protect and of giving poorer nations an effective voice in shared decision-making. This seems necessary in order to arrive at a political, juridical and economic order which can increase and give direction to international cooperation for the development of all peoples in solidarity. To manage the global economy; to revive economies hit by the crisis; to avoid any deterioration of the present crisis and the greater imbalances that would result; to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration: for all this, there is urgent need of a true world political authority*, as my predecessor Blessed John XXIII indicated some years ago. Such an authority would need to be regulated by law, to observe consistently the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, to seek to establish the

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006) 71.

common good and *to make a commitment to securing authentic integral human development inspired by the values of charity in truth.*<sup>3</sup>

For higher education to be transformed “into” a culture of dialogue and understanding, it too must be inspired first and foremost by these same values of charity in truth. Thank you.

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<sup>3</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Caritas In Veritate* Paragraphs 146-147 (June 29<sup>th</sup>, 2009) For official English text, see [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)