

IAU 2009 International Conference,

Notre Dame University - Louaize, Lebanon - 4-6 November 2009:

The Role of Higher Education in Fostering Inter-Cultural Dialogue and Understanding.

by Eva Egron Polak, IAU Secretary-General (6.11.2009)

When IAU and NDU embarked on the adventure of co-organizing an international conference on the topic of fostering the culture of dialogue and understanding, there were certainly some obstacles and concerns to overcome, notably those that Father Walid Moussa, President, Notre Dame University, our generous host, also introduced in his opening remarks: perceptions of insecurity and fear about coming to this country among some and the recognized difficulty of treating such a complex topic. Yet, there was also much enthusiasm among the IAU Board Members to address precisely this topic and to meet at NDU in Lebanon to do so.

The Conference brought together close to 200 participants from some 37 countries. The two days of debate and discussion have been both very enriching and enjoyable. We regret deeply though that visa problems prevented some from attending and participating in the dialogue.

The wealth of ideas, comments, experiences and suggestions that were expressed cannot be summarized easily in a brief Conference report without the risk of reductionisms. The conference topic invited us to listen and to hear each other. This is a pre-condition to dialogue and an integral part of dialogue. And I have done so intensely. But of course, each of us listens with our own ears, our own linguistic, religious, cultural, educational backgrounds and limitations, whether from Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, whether more or less versed and at ease in Arabic or French or English (the three languages of the Conference).

Why would IAU hold a conference on this topic, why in Lebanon, why now?

Part of the enthusiasm of the IAU Board stems from the fact that by focusing on these issues, IAU remains true to its initial *raison d'être*. It was founded so that universities could help humanity heal from the horror of WWII and more importantly to prevent such wars and conflicts in the future by fostering cooperation and understanding among higher education institutions and thus among the peoples of the world. For this reason, intercultural dialogue among universities remains continuously on our agenda.

The broader reason for convening a conference on this topic stems from a shared belief that without continued pursuit of dialogue as an approach to overcoming conflict at every level - the global, international, regional and local as well as among groups of individuals - the crisis that has been repeatedly mentioned during this conference becomes inevitable. In addition to a crisis of the current and dominant economic model, we face a crisis of values, an environmental crisis and a social crisis. Universities retain at least some if not most of the keys to avoid following this negative path.

Federico Mayor, *President, Culture of Peace Foundation, Former Director-General of UNESCO, Co-Chair of the High Level Group United Nations Alliance of Civilizations* and Keynote Speaker at the Conference, reminded us of the urgency to act since despite the variety of very strong and consensual declarations and commitments voiced in many quarters, we are still calling for action, still questioning how to instill a culture of dialogue in the universities and in society through the work of universities. We are still searching for how to build bridges and breach gaps that are wider than ever. In fact the urgency is growing and the complexity of the issues that threaten not just humanity but the planet itself is huge. Universities cannot solve all the problems of the world, yet universities have huge responsibilities and obligations for speaking the truth about the problems, searching and continuously testing all possible solutions – and as Juan Ramon de la Fuente, *President of IAU*, and others stated, most of all for educating individuals who are locally rooted, well informed global citizens able to make sound choices but also, I would add, who are able to recognize what they do not know and learn how to learn continuously about the other – without prejudice, without preconceptions.

Finally why meet in Lebanon, at NDU? We heard much about Lebanon as a laboratory, a model for creating conditions to live together in harmony, with a commitment to this at the highest level of the State. In a nation of 4 million people with 18 different religious groups living in very close proximity this is both a challenge and a necessity. NDU's commitment to serve as a microcosm for success in this effort has shined throughout the presentations and justified our choice of meeting there.

What is it that we mean by a culture of dialogue and a dialogue among cultures?

The conference offered a rich discussion highlighting many dimensions of the topic. We spoke about dialogue as a culture, as a way to behave, as a process on the one hand, but also about dialogue between different cultures, or intercultural dialogue on the other hand. In both cases, as a process and as the substance, dialogue is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Instilling a culture for intercultural dialogue is the only means – peaceful, productive and lasting - to cross some of the boundaries and distances that separate us.

Key among these boundaries and distances are those based on religion or spirituality, ethnicity, tribal origins, language and race. In fact depending on where we find ourselves to examine intercultural dialogue colors the focus of the discussion. It may stress religious dialogue, as was the case in Lebanon, or race as is often the case in the USA, or the focus could be on the tensions between indigenous or First Nations and the more recent arrivals to countries such as Australia, Canada and parts of Latin America.

But there are other boundaries as well – those of academic disciplines that can stand in the way of dialogue, of collaboration, and which block the path to creative solutions and innovations which are needed to overcome old and persistent problems. Finally and importantly, there are boundaries and walls created by differences in power, whether that power is based on might/force or wealth and these asymmetries must be also be recognized for what they are, and they must be addressed with urgency and courage.

How?

The informative and thoughtful presentations at this conference offered both the broad-based directions and the more practical approaches that may need to be considered. Some called for universities to reassess in very fundamental ways their mission, their pedagogical approach, their research and curriculum in the pursuit and transmission of truth and knowledge, respectively. At the same time we also heard more pragmatic suggestions about how higher education institutions can prepare graduates who will build the Wisdom Society, as suggested a few years ago by a former IAU Board Member, Paulo Blasi.

Some of the basic building blocks that serve as framing features or pre-requisites for fostering dialogue, were noted as follows:

- Respecting the other's point of view even if we disagree and may think he is wrong
- Recognizing fully the contributions of all civilizations, all cultures, all religions and faiths.
- Openness and sensitivity to the other, not fear of what we do not know; on the contrary curiosity about the unknown; not seeing the other as a threat but rather seeing difference as enriching
- Creating conditions of equality and dignity in dialogue and ensure that we empower especially those who are most marginalized to take part in the dialogue.

The conference offered many other elements, too long to list here.

What next?

First and foremost, the answers to this question rest with all the Conference participants. Indeed, if we wish to foster higher education that embraces dialogue as an integral part of its mission, it requires action at the institutional, classroom level with stakeholders inside and outside the university.

But some of what IAU can and will do next is as follows:

- The presentations will be available on the conference website as tools and resources for your future work in this area
- Intercultural dialogue will remain a focus of study and attention in our work as part of IAU's work on internationalization, a major focus for the association. The IAU WebPages on this topic, including most international declarations related to intercultural dialogue, will continue to be updated regularly and IAU remains open to receiving information about other resources that you may know about.
- IAU is in discussion with NDU and with the Council of Europe, which published the White paper on Intercultural Dialogue 'Living Together As Equals in Dignity' and held a meeting in Moscow in June of this year on this theme about a joint publication of a select number of papers that were presented at both events.

Finally, the upcoming **IAU 2010 International Conference** to take place at Mykolas Romeris University in Vilnius, Lithuania, from 24-26 June, 2010 will carry our reflection further. The theme of the conference, ***Ethics and Values in Higher Education in the Era of Globalization***, invites us to consider the ways in which we pursue not only the important economic role that universities fulfill today but also the broader cultural and social mission of the university. Can we identify universal values and ethical codes that we all share in higher education? And what are some of the new threats that we face today in this regard. We can only hope that Vilnius will be as rich, as enjoyable and as successful as this conference has been and we hope we will all learn as much as we have learned in Lebanon.