

## **From Lip service to inter-cultural reality**

**DARE Conference-Vienna. 16th November 2008**

### **Bashy Quraishy**

Consultant – Inter-cultural living

Chair – Jewish Muslim Co-operation Platform - Brussels

Chair – Advisory Council ENAR( European Network Against Racism –Brussels)

Nyelandsvej 53, 2000 Frederiksberg. Denmark

Tel & Fax: (45) 38 88 19 77. Mobile: (45) 40 15 47 71. E-mail: bashy@mail.dk. www.bashy.dk.dk.

First of all, my thanks to the organisers of this important conference for the invitation. The subject of life long learning is very close to my heart. The organisation DARE also deserves appreciation because it has taken on board issues, no one else dares to talk about, namely Democracy and Human Rights education in Europe. I agree with your goals and vision one hundred percent. When European native populations through your efforts will learn about these important concepts, they would start treating non-European ethnic and religious minorities with respect and dignity and not just as 2nd class citizens or worst as merely immigrants.

**The title of this plenary session is; Can good ideas go bad? From lip service to inter-cultural reality.**

Let me answer the first part of this question; **Can good ideas go bad?**

Yes, good ideas often go bad and in the case of adult education and life long learning for ethnic and religious minorities in Europe, it has not been a success story. The reason is simple. Too much lip service and too little vision and plan of action. I am not saying this to provoke you or make you mad. I am just presenting you what minorities have experiences for the last 40 years. I shall certainly come back to it later.

I am a NGO person. All my life, I have worked against racial bigotry, ethnic inequality, cultural arrogance and discrimination against religions. That is why, I measure all issues concerning majority and minorities interaction, from a moral and humanistic standpoint as well as judicial protection. And to have a meaningful dialogue and co-operation, it is vital that I am brutally honest in my assessment and do not beat around the bush.

### **Inter-culturalism in Europe**

When we discuss Inter-culturalism, inter-cultural learning, inter-cultural interaction and even education of non-European ethnic and religious minorities, it is advisable that we first look at four mechanisms in European societies.

- What do we understand with the concept - Inter-culturalism?
- What is the connection between socio-economic conditions of minorities and the making of inter-culturalism in Europe?
- How discrimination and lack of opportunities hinder inter-cultural living?
- What role media and the politicians play in creating prejudices?

I sincerely believe that finding answers to these vital questions will enable us to be more objective and nuanced in our efforts to create a truly harmonious society. It would also clearly explain, why the so-called integration process has not succeeded up until now. But before I make an effort to present my views for your consideration and of course discussion, please let me give you a short history of those people, I refer to as non-European ethnic and religious minorities. According to Euro-barometer, there are 23 million persons living in Europe whose origins are from outside Europe; Middle East, Asia, Latin America, Africa and some from USA, Canada and Australia. 70% among these groups, have a Muslim background and it is these people, Europeans refer to as foreigners, when the topics of failed integration and unsuccessful multiculturalism is discussed.

### **To put things in perspective, let me give you my own example.**

I have lived for 40 years in Europe and USA. I speak 6 languages and have two university degrees. I have a Danish passport since 1976. I have paid lots of taxes and have done more than most native Danes or Europeans can ever do for the development of society – socially, economically, politically and even intellectually. But I and most people like me are still considered as outsiders, Auslander and funny enough just immigrants. This is the reality of Europe 2008. It is not what you contribute to the society but how you look, what culture you are born in and more and more if you are a Muslim. That is what makes your identity in today's Europe.

So the whole issue of inter-culturalism in Europe has become a question of Natives vs. Guests, Integration vs. Segregation, West vs. Islam and Democracy vs. Extremism.

I understand the dilemmas minorities are facing in Europe because I am part of them, work with them and listen to their worries. Having said that I know that you, the participants of this conference are dedicated people. You

are doing a wonderful job in your respective capacity. You are also worried about the situation, I am describing. To put in simpler terms, relationship between minorities and majority in any given society is like a family affair – an elder brother who has power to decide, wants to dominate and demands obedience while the younger brother wants love, care and a little piece of the pie.

Now let me share with you a recent example of **European model of inter-cultural dialogue on the highest level.**

To kick start the Year of Inter-cultural dialogue, the European Commission's Culture and Youth DG held the opening conference in January 2008. Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini was at that time Commissioner of Justice and Vice President of EU Commission. Mr Frattini and I were main speakers. I was to speak at the start to present minority perspective on inter-culturalism and the Commissioner Frattini was supposed to comment on my views.

He came 15 minutes late, demanded to speak first and then left. In his speech, he talked about terrorism, extremism, how Muslims should behave and kept on calling minorities as foreigners.

So this is the European official model of inter-cultural dialogue.

Majority defines the discourse, dictates the terms and refuses to listen, let alone be advised. I wish that such action was an isolated incident, but it the norm. This is how most people among the majority understand inter-cultural dialogue.

### **Mindset has to alter**

It is however thought provoking that most European politicians, institutions, media and public insist that a dialogue, co-operation and integration of non-European minorities should be based on the foundation of common values and democratic principles. No sane person would disagree or reject such lofty vision.

But the problem with this approach is that these perceived common values are defined, drafted and forced upon by the majority. Minorities have very little say in this matter. They have no power to protest against these practices or have means to challenge this mindset. To most minorities, the insistence these common values are no less than the dictatorship of the majority.

As far as the process of integration is concerned, the situation is no different. The majority asks the minorities to integrate without making any effort to do the same. The present official integration policy in most European countries is again prescribed by the majority, which sets strict conditions, provides few opportunities and often ignores to consult the minorities. On top of this, the blame for the lack of successful integration is squarely put on the doorstep of minorities by claiming; **They do not want to integrate.**

To have a clearer picture, let us see at the 3 **models of societies in Europe.**

- **Mono-cultural** – one dominant culture, religion, language, national identity and mindset has absolute say in the way, society is run
- **Multi-cultural** – mono-culture with a sprinkle of subcultures living on the periphery, commonly known as parallel societies. Power to decide still remains with the majority
- **Inter-cultural** – majority culture in constant interaction with minorities in a common negotiated space but with freedom to move freely, take part in decision making and share power

Mono-culturalism is out of question in the present circumstances. Multiculturalism has not worked, not because minorities rejected it but because it was based on unreasonable demands from the majority and only had a tiny room for consultation with minorities.

In my opinion, it is the inter-cultural model, which is our only hope for the future.

### **So what are the conditions for a dialogue in the society.**

- An undying belief in the creation of a harmonious, inter-ethnic, inter-cultural and inter-religious common space
- A common vision
- A sense of belonging and collective ownership
- An equal playing field and position on the same table
- An open mind, two ways conversation and polite way of arguing
- Equal opportunities to agree as well as disagree

- A common strategy and plan of action
- A continuous effort to move forward

Here I would like to mention that I am a great believer of a dialogue, but the time has come to move to a higher level. I call this inter-cultural co-operation between people – in order to learn, teach, share and benefit.

### **Inter-cultural learning**

Now I come to the question of education and learning, both formal and informal. In Europe, when minorities are discussed, we often hear about their lack of qualification, missing professional education, bad linguistic skills and even their primitive cultures being responsible for such situation.

I come from the land of Grundtvig, the grand father of life long learning. His movement of mass education was for the peasants and ordinary people who were not at the same level of knowledge as the elite, priests and landowners. It was not cultural, religious or scientific education. It was something unique; education for life in subjects, people could relate to.

Today Denmark and with it, all western countries are reaping the benefits of that pioneer work. Such a mass movement is again required in Europe to spread such knowledge among ethnic and religious minorities, preferably in their own mother tongues. It can be done through radio broadcasts, TV programmes, magazine and leaflets, neighbourhood classes and language classes.

Many people among ethnic groups have very little information as to what changes are taking place in their neighbourhood, in the city, in the country and even much less on EU level. This adult education should not be geared towards labour market but towards creating a new society.

A society where people with different backgrounds and from different cultures can be challenged, develop flexible attitudes, built bridges over troubled waters and live peacefully. It may sound like **Hallelujah Syndrome** but it is not. After all, this is what happened in Europe among nations who hated each other for centuries. Apart from Balkan tragedy, we have a peaceful and prosperous Europe since 2<sup>nd</sup> World War.

Please keep in mind that the main aim of my criticism is not to put down anyone. I just want to remind the democratic Europe and its wonderful native citizens that we must hold on to the model of a society which is inclusive, values diversity and rewards all individuals for their contributions to the society, they live in.

### **Minorities and education**

It is true that most early immigrants from non-European countries did not have very good education. But the need at that time was not educated but hard working unskilled workers. I myself experienced discrimination because of my high education. When in 1971, I applied for a job as an engineer, I was told by the personal manager of a large engineering company: "Mr Quraisy, your qualifications are fine but you have a wrong colour. We have not invited people like you to work as engineers but as dish washers."

The younger generations among many minority groups are getting good education but even today they face wide spread discrimination in the labour market. But still, according to the projections of the EU Commission, Europe in coming years would need 15 –20 million extra unskilled workers, just to satisfy the service sector. Most Europeans are getting old, birth rate in many countries is negative and cheap labour from Eastern Europe would one-day stop. It would be Turks, Pakistanis, Moroccans and Arabs who would come to the rescue of poor old Europe.

That is why, Europe's education system – right from the kindergartens, schools, high schools, and even universities should gear up for the coming requirements. The same goes for vocational education, training skills and apprenticeships. I would even go even one step further. European education systems have to prepare themselves in accepting languages such as Turkish, Arabic, Persian, Hindi and Chinese as medium of future education. The globalisation has shifted the balance of power from West to East. The only way to be competitive is to master your trading partner's language.

### **Educators and integration**

Coming back to more pressing needs of the present day situation, it would be wonderful that adult education sector is more actively involved in the process of integrating minorities. In 1992, I suggested at the annual meeting of Danish Folk High Schools that maybe they should ask the government for the permission to start language and integration courses for refugees and those who come through family reunions. I was politely turned down. "Their schools were only for life long learning and not teaching minorities", I was reminded. But since few years, they have opened their doors for minorities. Unfortunately, not because they thought the idea was good but because their funding was drying up and one way, they could survive was to earn money through minorities.

I know that most educators are very dedicated people who want to make a difference. By giving tools to minorities – language skills, knowledge of society, a sense of belonging and awareness of diversity, educators would certainly succeed where politicians failed.

But cultural diversity does not mean eating Donar Kebab, learning Belly Dance or listening to Bob Marley's music. To me diversity whether it is cultural, ethnic or religious is that we celebrate and enjoy the differences as well as similarities. We should practice it because we live in a globalised world. Internet, e-mail and fast travel has opened the borders, which can not be closed any longer. Celebrating diversity also demands that we do not force the other to accept the way, we do things. It can be only achieved by good examples, co-operation and respect.

You, the delegates of this conference and many more, I meet all over Europe is the proof that decent people have had enough. Now they want to act. My father was an educationalist. He often said to me; **"Soldiers destroy societies but teachers built them again"**.

I still remember his words and that is why I believe that education in itself is a sacred value, which leads to the paramount value of respect, and accept among people. Education not only gives knowledge, wisdom and self-confidence but also forms our opinions, attitudes and behaviour towards the society and people, we do not know or have not met before.

**In short, education is a tonic, which sustains our spirit.**

So let us look at the role of education in intercultural co-existence as well as in an anti-discrimination discourse. I would argue that the underlying goal of education should be inter-cultural and not mono-cultural. Education should be used to affect social change. The pathway toward this goal incorporates three strands of transformation:

- **the transformation of self**
- **the transformation of educational curriculum**
- **the transformation of society**

It is true that education – on a mass scale – through schools, colleges, universities, and evening courses and in vocational institutions, has been an integral part of European societies for a long time. Based on this life long learning process, European countries succeeded in building, well functioning societies and a very high standard of welfare.

But it was not the material development or a great pool of highly qualified workers for the labour market only, which is so striking. Mass education was also necessary to create tolerant citizens who respected human rights, peaceful human interaction and who turned their backs to war, prejudices and discrimination of others.

Unfortunately, when we look at the present landscape of Europe, we can see that gains achieved in last 150 years, to educate Europeans to cherish the values of diversity and of inter-culturalism, are under severe strain. A sizeable segment of media and many politicians are openly advocating mono-cultural identity of Europe based on Christian values, a common concept of history and the superiority of western culture.

In my work with non-European visible minorities, I often get this question; Why so many educated people in Europe have changed so drastically from humanism to racism in such a short time?

In such atmosphere, ethnic and religious minorities are looking towards you, for answers, for support, solidarity and an open society. In the meantime, I would share with you some of my thoughts of your role.

### **Task of educators**

Looking at the whole European education system and the place of ethnic and religious minorities in it, I would appeal to the European educators to keep in mind few aspects:

- Inter-cultural education, where the starting point is not to emphasize the dominant culture but the contributions of various cultures to the well being of Europe.
- More inclusive curriculum where respect, accept and knowledge of each other is a basic factor of education.
- Education as part of a larger societal transformation and not to serve to maintain the status quo foundations such as white supremacy, capitalism, global socio-economic situations, and exploitation.
- Equal opportunity to achieve full individual potential.
- Be prepared to effectively facilitate learning
- Be active participant in ending discrimination of all types, first by ending it within your own ranks, then by producing socially and critically active and aware citizens
- Educators, activists, and others must take a more active role in re-examining all educational practices and how they affect the learning
- Your contribution to integrate both majority and minorities with each other is vital

In order to have a successful relationship between an educator and the minorities, an educator's own opinions, vision, professionalism, knowledge and an interest in the learner's background plays an important role. It is not a 9-5 job but a life long commitment and a labour of love. A non-Euro-centric attitude of the teacher helps the minorities to open up and be receptive to the changes, they normally consider as, foreign, unnecessary or even hostile.

In short, educator can successfully enter where politicians, media and public have no access, namely the mind and soul of a minority individual. This is where the first step to mutual integration starts.

### **Adult education and mutual integration**

Until very recently, European governments were reluctant to involve adult educational institutions like High Schools or Trade Union Vocational Courses or even evening classes provided by private tutors. The result has been that not only a sizeable number of old immigrants – men and women as well as those who later came through family reunion or as refugees, found themselves in isolated position.

In a country like Denmark where High School movement for mass adult education started, compulsory learning of Danish language started in 1986 and education of cultural understanding or societal orientation came in to effect in 1996.

Most European countries were even further behind. But here again, there was not any effort to create an inclusive society, celebrate diversity or even appreciate the contributions made by minority groups to the functioning of the society. Here I would certainly commend EU Commission which not only declared 2008 as the year of Inter-cultural dialogue but also in the last many years provided funds for inter-cultural learning. Many EU projects raised the awareness among educators and institutions of an intercultural opening.

### **Minority wishes**

I just wish that individual member states also realise the benefits of such approach. I have done few surveys among large ethnic groups. There are some interesting pointers in these gathered opinions. One of the clear signs was that minority communities do want to be part of the society and learn the language. Keeping that in mind, I would suggest that;

- Adult education institutions are in a unique position to be partner in mutual integration. Here majority and minorities can interact closely. It is therefore desirable that EU countries openly support such initiatives by funding and accepting the results
- Adult education should be individual oriented. Only then it can raise the awareness among the disadvantaged persons, of the society they live in, its culture, ways of conducting life, norms and hidden codes of conduct of the common person.
- Adult education can provide the support and tools, which are necessary to know one's rights as well as how and where to use these rights successfully.
- Adult education would enable minorities to take part in societal discussion, influence political process, energise NGOs and grassroots work and participate on equal terms
- Adult education can also offer courses in mother tongue for the elderly who have not or can not learn the local language. These courses can be in history, sports, political system, the rights and the responsibilities of the minorities

**Since unilateral mindset can only be rearranged by the educators, so let us see how Inter-cultural Education can be used.**

- Education is central in addressing the challenge of social cohesion and promoting solidarity and non-discrimination in a more diverse Europe.
- Education and training systems can instil values of respect, diversity and non-prejudice among minorities as well as majorities
- Education systems must ensure access and participation to quality education for all that adequately address underachievement and educational disadvantage.
- Better partnerships must be promoted between formal education and training systems and civil society in developing core competencies and skills.

**As part of European Union, we should ask EU to:**

- Promote a common vision of lifelong learning that creates bridges between individuals from all segments in society, formal and non-formal actors in education and training and promote a civil dialogue, solidarity and respect in an increasingly diverse Europe.
- Ensure that each individual be endowed with the skills and capacities that are likely to help to progress in a knowledge-driven society and economy
- Improve and strengthen the social dimension of education and training in the context of the Lisbon goals and beyond, in defining new policy objectives for the future framework for education and training.
- Use mechanisms for coordination, financial support, mutual learning, and peer review in education in a more structured way to promote competence and best practice exchange among member states concerning race equality.
- Mainstream the specific issues and needs of ethnic minorities into current and future Open Methods of Coordination
- Create a physical environment that visually reflects and validates inter-culturalism through diversity (cultural and professional) in the education teams and encourage the participation of families and communities/cultural organisations
- Encourage the use of positive action measures.
- Make further opportunities and funding for teacher training and adequate resources available at trans-national and national levels in the areas of race equality and intercultural education.
- Incorporate a broad range of curriculum initiatives, which includes not only second and native language programmes but also incorporates citizenship and human rights education, intercultural educational activities aimed at facilitating intercultural understanding and dialogue, conflict resolution, intercultural arts projects and parental involvement
- A network of education professionals and policy makers could be developed, with a good representation of ethnic minority educators and education focused NGOs. The EU could support the network through a programme of conferences and seminars to enhance opportunities for networking and information exchange

on the subject of promoting race equality in education. It should also utilise this network as a channel for consultation with key stake-holders and ethnic minority communities on education and training policies and programmes.

Please do not take it as finger pointing. I am just delivering the message, seen from grassroots and minority perspectives. You have every right to disagree or even reject what I have just said. Having said that, I am painfully aware that while majority has the power to open or close the door, a great deal of **responsibility also lies with minorities.**

The process of inter-cultural living can only succeed if minorities are proactive, take a constructive attitude towards the well-being of the whole society and play their due part in the development process.

**I have always advised the minorities to do five practical things.**

- Learn and master the language and educate yourself
- Accept and respect the law and the constitution of the land
- Create good relationships in the neighbourhoods
- Adopt and enjoy the majority culture as best as you can
- Practice your culture and religion peacefully and show respect to your fellow human being

Over and above these 5 conditions, every person has all the rights to live life according to his/ her needs, wishes and desires.

State, authorities and society should not dictate or force a minority person to assimilate, overtake the majority norms or be a bad copy of the majority. So in the end, it all boils down to mutual effort. But people's opinions do not change overnight. It is a gradual process but we must take the first step towards each other. Otherwise we shall stand still forever.

**Here, I want to offer a word of caution to ethnic minorities.**

We must be aware that full participation will not be served on a silver plate. It has to be gained through political struggle, based on a clear analysis, doing away with wishful thinking and with a close co-operation of those who still believe in human rights, pluralistic development and most important of all in keeping their societies democratic.

**Common front and common efforts**

I propose that progressive people like you and ethnic minority organisations must join forces and talk directly to the people. This approach will create trust and understanding among the ethnic minorities and encourage them to take the full responsibility of their actions.

It will also make it easier for the authorities to understand the problems faced by the ethnic minorities, like unavailability of financial resources, absence of networking and lack of opportunities. We need a strong movement of dedicated people all across Europe to join forces, involve minorities and discuss in earnest in formulating policies and taking practical steps.

I would also take this opportunity to praise the EU Commission for its vision and support for those who want to make a difference. I wish individual countries in Europe also wake up from sleep and see the beauty of inter-cultural living.

Unfortunately, our experience tells us that if it is left to member states to formulate and implement good policies and practices, Europe will never achieve a peaceful, harmonious and inter-cultural status, like Canada, USA or even Australia. Media populism and political nationalism has become that two headed snake which is scary and guarding the vested interests.

That is why, it is left to us – noble people among minorities and the majority to make an extra effort to be inclusive. This society is yours as much as mine. My rights are yours and they need protection, care and a voice. We should all speak up before it is too late.

### **So where do we go from here!**

Ethnic minorities sincerely believe that there are people, movements and forces in Europe who are concerned about their beautiful country and continent, its great human values, its international reputation, its freedom-loving spirit, and its humanism. The task ahead may be difficult, but it is not impossible.

As the great anthropologist Margaret Mead once said;

**" Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has".**

We want a Europe of true peace and prosperity for all its inhabitants. Minorities certainly want to be respected as fellow human being. They want their colour, religion, accent, cultural and ethnic background not to be seen and experienced as a hindrance, but instead, as a positive and enhancing contribution to the society they live in. The ethnic minorities and the progressive forces must join hands, and this co-operation must be above political ideology and human pity. They must work to build a society free of prejudices, and bubbling with tolerance and heartfelt openness.

This can happen if the western rational spirit mingles with the eastern philosophical soul, paving the way for a true understanding.

The Great Lebanese philosopher and poet Khalil Gibran once said:

**"Love is not looking at each other, but looking in the same direction".**

I would end by quoting what the late American writer, Susan Sontag once said:

**"Some people claim that Europe is dead.**

**May be, it will be right to say that Europe is yet to be born.**

**A Europe that takes care of its defenceless minorities is badly needed.**

**It is necessary that Europe is multi-cultural, otherwise it will cease to exist".**

**Only fools would disagree!**