

## DWELLIN IN THE BOUNDARY TO MEET THE UNFAMILIAR: CONDITIONS FOR AN INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

*Juan Carlos Gumucio. Ph.D.  
University of Uppsala, Sweden*

*You are the fountain of the sun's light  
I am a willow shadow on the ground.  
You make my ruggedness silky*

*Rumi, Sublime Generosity*

This paper is about the perennial need to go beyond our more familiar reflective grounds and in order to create the conditions for a constructive intercultural dialogue to be able to dwell in the border areas of our conscience and our culture.

It would appear that this is something urgently needed today, not the least in Europe, after the violent storm caused recently by the publication of the Muhammed caricatures by a newspaper in Denmark. The examination of the subsequent discussion carried out throughout Europe amounts to a lesson in humility, inasmuch as although much effort was devoted invoking two principles, liberty of expression and respect for the tenets of Islam, both principles were most often merely juxtaposed rather than reconciled. This perceived inability to produce a constructive and sustainable synthesis seems to preclude a long-term understanding and postpones the active collaboration between groups that, irrespective of creed and nationality, are engaged in the advancement of Human Rights issues throughout the Mediterranean region.

In order to do this we must build up a genuine curiosity for unfamiliar but potentially enriching concepts and practices. Moreover, we must have the capacity to remain in that humble position of the one who seeks at that uncertain place of the boundary. Not because we (let's say in the West) don't have our own precious cultural heritage, which we do, but because simply we do not possess everything that is of value.

In the following lines, I want to argue from the twin perspectives of an Anthropology of the place and a Philosophy of the border.

1. By an Anthropology of the place I mean simply the concrete cases we have to confront, the judgments we do arrive to and the specific decisions we then have to take. As if that was not contentious enough within given societies <sup>1</sup>, how much more arduous is it not between societies, when the “if-then” of general precept and the “as-therefore” of the concrete case is differently argued and expressed (Geertz, 174). The observed difficulty in finding ways to reconcile the if-then principle of liberty of expression with the as-therefore consideration to the tenets of a particular creed, suggests we need to equip ourselves with better intercultural tools.

We need in other worlds a stronger sense of what Jonathan Sacks calls an **ethics of responsibility**. Such an ethics would be consistent with a face-to-face kind of relationship in a complex regional society conceived as an extended family (Sacks, 52). As we know, that was the situation in the Iberian al’Andalus and the emerging Spanish society during the Middle Ages, where a dynamic multiculturalism influenced even the development of what would become the Spanish language:

The incomparable Castilian [of the Don Quixote] is the direct descendant of the Castilian first forged out of the little groups of Muslims, Christians and Jews who worked together, in Toledo, to translate that magnificent Arabic library first into Latin and then into Castilian, which was the mother tongue of all of them and which they all spoke to each other (Menocal, 263)

And in old Castilian, taking us to a concrete place and time is this traditional Sephardic romance about a prisoner aboard a ship:

Galeas las mis galeas	Galleys, my galleys
Non las puedo sonportar	I cannot suffer this
Aman, aman de mi!	Take pity of me
No las puedo sonportar.	I cannot suffer this
Poco pan, mucho trabajo.	Not much bread, lots of work

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<sup>1</sup> A heated polemic nowadays in Sweden is about the role of Swedish as national linguistic standard. Which kind of linguistic policy best serves the interests of a pluralistic society?

Kon palos, i non dormir. Aman, aman de mi!	They beat me, I cannot sleep Take pity of me
Palos, yevi setecientos Ke los lados no me siento Ke me vendan el asiento I ke me rezgaten d'aki Aman, aman de mi	They have beaten me 700 times I cannot feel my sides Sell my seat Let them rescue me from this place Take pity of me

The song from Thesaloniki is part of the musical tradition of the Sephardic Jews who were forced to leave Spain in the late 15<sup>th</sup> Century after living there for centuries in close contact with Muslims and Christians. This slave is pleading for his liberty and the restoration of those things he formerly had: his garments, his white horse and his donkey. From the perspective of these former Jewish Iberians, he is invoking *tzedakah*, i.e. charity as justice (Sacks, 42).

As then, we confront today multiple situations where *tzedakah* is urgently needed <sup>2</sup>. The concept is based on the virtue of *hessed*, i.e. civility in the doing of acts of kindness and in conversation, with Biblical roots in Covenant love:

I remember the kindness (hessed) of your youth, the love of your  
betrothal – how thou were willing to follow Me through the desert in an  
unsown land  
Jer. 2:2

This covenantal relationship connects with the secular foundation of the modern state in the sense that cooperation should be made on a face-to-face basis. In the words of Jonathan Sacks: *Societies are only human and humanizing when they are a community of communities built on face-to-face encounters (p.54).*

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<sup>2</sup> To name one, the need to revise the agricultural subsidies within the European Union, in view of their negative effects on the agriculture of many poor countries.

2. These encounters take place preferentially at the boundary where we meet, sometimes in agreement, sometimes not. The philosophy of the boundary reminds us that it is never enough to remain within the bounds of that we are familiar with, however reassuring, tempting and comfortable that often appears. However, even if we are always overstepping our boundaries in some sense or other, that fact is not *per se* a fulfillment as it is merely the opening up of new horizons and new possibilities (Barrios, 84).

In order to really achieve something constructive we should have the staying power needed to get detailed and precise knowledge of what the other has to say.

This can be approached from the Arabic concept of *jadal*, the discussion, the lively debate. Something that should not be taken as the occasion to merely gain points from the adversary or interlocutor, but as the opportunity to engage in fruitful and mutually enriching exchanges, without for that matter forgetting our own identities.

The spirit that should underlie these exchanges can be illustrated with this poem by the 13<sup>th</sup>. Century Sufi mystic Jalal al-Din Rumi:

**On Spring Jiddiness – A Lively Conversation Between Plants**

The hyacinth speaks formally to the jasmine,  
“Peace be with you.” And peace to you, lad!  
Come walk with me in this meadow”

Again, there are sufis everywhere!

The narcissus winks at the wisteria,  
“Whenever you say”

And the clove to the willow”You are the one  
I hope for”. The willow replies, “Consider  
these chambers of mine yours. Welcome”

Rumi, 33

In other words, a covenantal kind of relationship. It would appear that not many could be against such a scheme of things, but actually that is not the case. Those against mutual understanding are perhaps not many, but they are indeed powerful. We have for instance the case of Capt. James Yee, late of the US Army, the first American military that has told in public about the hostility and profanity shown against Islam in the concentration camp in Guantanamo. From December 2002 he worked as chaplain for the “enemy combatants” detained there, only to be himself after some time accused of treason, be thrown into prison, and held uncommunicated for 76 days.

Capt. Yee, the “Chinese Taliban” as he was called, is very much in love with his country and does not by any means want to accuse a whole nation of being xenophobic and intolerant. He shares the “American dream” and he thought that that dream, in a country where many Muslims have been able to develop ideas about their religion that would have meant jail or even death in countries like Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, would include . But when, as part of the effort to fight against terrorism, he tried to be a bridge between his fellow Americans and Muslims, it is quite apparent that some circles found that quite unbearable<sup>3</sup>.

Within the realm of Western modernity, we pledge justly adherence to values we are not prepared to compromise, which are those values related to the liberty and integrity of every citizen and to the democratic principles that must govern society. Consistent with an approach that aims at the crossing of borders, we could say that we are called to share this legal patrimony not with anachronic arrogant and hegemonic claims, but as it were the gentle telling or narrative of the Jewish "Haggadah", the recital of the Passover story.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.elpais.es/articulo/elpporopi/20060420elpepiopi\\_14/Tes/caso/talibán/chino](http://www.elpais.es/articulo/elpporopi/20060420elpepiopi_14/Tes/caso/talibán/chino)