

# Preface

**Giancarlo Bosetti**

This book epitomizes a desire for dialogue amidst a stormy season of conflict. The İstanbul seminars, inaugurated in 2008, exemplify the spirit and intentions of Reset-Dialogues on Civilizations, an association created to promote all that its name implies: the development of a conversation between people that transcends political, cultural, linguistic, and religious borders, facilitating communication between East and West and North and South, from both sides of Samuel Huntington's "fault lines." This annual meeting we hold, greatly anticipated by young scholars of philosophy and social science from all over the world, was started by Nina zu Fürstenberg and myself with a preparatory phase that lasted a few years. This delay was also caused by attempts to hold the event elsewhere – in Tehran and in Cairo – that were met with adversity, such as the arrest and exile of one of our Iranian partners and friends, Ramin Jahanbegloo. At the time, freedom of the press – and freedom in general – in Egypt was restricted by the Mubarak regime, which further complicated all public initiatives.

Our association was created in reaction to 9/11 (2001) and all that followed; it is an attempt to heal the wounds and tensions that, since then, have remained open and unresolved between the United States and the Arab world, between the West and Islam, and between the two shores of the Mediterranean. Even in describing these tensions, generalizations arise that require definition and clarification. The general categories, religious or civilizational, to which we are tempted to reduce current crises, explain little and require many distinctions. What does Islam mean? What comprises the Muslim world? And who represents the Arabs? Bin Laden? Or the Tunisian leaders awarded with the Nobel Peace Prize? And the West? Who represents the West? The destroyed Twin Towers? Bush Jr. and the army occupying Baghdad? Or Obama? Or the British and American hostages who have been beheaded? Or Angela Merkel and the complicated and incomplete European framework?

When we set this project in motion, we wanted above all to oppose the strong inclination, present even among intellectuals, to raise barriers, to end communication, and to withdraw into isolated academic domains while waiting for the dust of explosions and wars to settle. We have entered a season in which, in everyday

conversations and in the media environment in which we are immersed, we continuously observe the attribution of all that is evil to the “other bank” of the river, to the other shore of the sea, and to the other side of the world. This applies to terrorism as it applies to all wars and economic crises. Popular cartoonists in Cairo portray Daesh as a ferocious guard dog on a leash held by Uncle Sam. For how long will they continue to do so? European tabloids indiscriminately hurl accusations at “Islamic bastards,” as if one could confuse the responsibilities of bloodthirsty minorities with millions of peaceful human beings. For how long will this continue? When will more clear-headed analyses triumph?

It is difficult to challenge the historic accusations leveled at the United States regarding catastrophic mistakes made in Iran, starting with the deposal of its democratic leader Mossadeq or when, occupying Iraq and getting rid of Saddam Hussein, they installed a Shiite-majority regime, provoking Sunni resentment. On the other hand, it is irrefutable that suicide bombers kill innocent children and teenagers in the name of Islam, but they do this in the name of a “betrayed God,” to borrow a phrase from François Hollande, and, in so doing, blasphemously co-opt a religion, as Pope Francis has said. And yet they do it all the same.

Many Muslims rebel against this (“Not in my name,” they say) and do not accept that the condemnation of such violence should be postponed until a time when the faults of colonialism have been rectified. However, the world stage today is crowded with irresponsible politicians cobbling together bits and pieces of the truth to create narratives rooted in resentment that fuel their own consensus, on one side and on the other, the danger of sparking never-ending radical hatred is great. It is made more serious by the fact that, on both “shores,” one lives in “media bubbles” which, after all, are also different “cultural bubbles” that communicate very little, if at all – and all of this in spite of globalization.

The same event – a war or a terrorist attack, like those that followed the Danish cartoons in 2005, or the attack on Benghazi during which the American ambassador to Libya was killed in 2012 following the release of a satirical amateur film on Mohammed – is reported through totally different narrative frameworks, almost as if they were speaking to different events. The portrayal of the United States by Salafite satellite television stations competes perversely with the portrayal of Islam in European extreme right wing newspapers or by Fox News. To each their own bubble.

Intellectuals can react to this multiplication of distances with serious analyses, through the creation of direct dialogues that bridge these disparate “shores” – and all the shores of the world – and by fighting radicalization, extremism, and violence, as well as trying to analyze their roots using the instruments of their disciplines. The knowledge that comes from such dialogues, from the use of a broad spectrum of human sciences, is what is intended to be presented to the public here: a culture of pluralism, the idea that differences can coexist and respect one another within state and international rule sets that, in different cultural contexts, can assert human rights, the dignity of the person, women’s rights, respect for one’s own cultural identity and also the freedom of individuals to cultivate and modify it, and the

freedom to practice and defend a religious belief but also to abandon it. It is a reality that is not achieved without problems and conflict.

Dialogue is not itself enough. It must be implemented without the naivety and the snobbism of believing that it can suddenly turn on a magic light that dissolves the shadows. But it is indispensable for not perpetuating radical cartoon-like portrayals of the Other. Dialogue is needed to pin down prejudices, to unmask enemy-focused visions of the world that fuel rancor and enflame public discourse. Ongoing conflicts, violence, terrorism, and fear also polarize democratic societies to the point that all sense of proportion is lost; an external enemy, or even more an internal one like immigrants, becomes the explanatory principle for so many social or economic issues, without regard for pertinence or accuracy. Hence, in much of the Arab world, the West becomes the overall cause of disquiet and economic problems. The opponent, real or imagined, absorbs all the attention paid to public issues following a process one could define as “thinking through the enemy” or in Latin “*cogitare per inimicos*.” It is the atmosphere that produces wars. It summarizes, better than anything else, everything that the İstanbul seminars seek to oppose.

Dialogue is indispensable for paving the way for peaceful solutions, and although we are well aware that it is not enough to end wars, we rely on the fact that it can contain the irreducible terms of a conflict and perhaps be useful for helping us understand the reasoning of others, for facilitating compromise, a *modus vivendi* while we wait for better days. The answer to this escalation of resentment is therefore not inexistent and impossible “good thoughts” but rather the serious work of knowledge production and of analysis that does not allow itself to be attracted to the magnetism of polarization and instead pursues sobriety with tenacity and through dialogue and debate.

Our dialogues found the best possible location in İstanbul, thanks to a solid and lasting cooperation with Bilgi University, a lively Turkish university with great sense of international openness, located at the extreme end of the Golden Horn. For 9 years, we have never moved from there. We began during a phase in which Erdogan’s party, the AKP, which came to power in 2003, had embarked on a cycle of *détente* following the strict Republican and Kemalist military regime. Motivated by the dialogue established to discuss Turkey’s European Union membership, it at last became possible to address in public the subject of Armenian remembrance as well as the rights of the enormous Alawite and Kurdish minorities, as we did and as you will see in this book. This is what makes Turkey a composite country, although this has been forcefully kept semi-hidden under the constitutional dogma of Atatürk’s nationalism.

This *détente* continued to the point that a fully legal Kurdish political party was formed, representing the hopes of the liberal opposition, but which now has drawn to a halt in the face of a worrying involution of Erdogan’s power, liberticidal measures against opponents, and the violent repression of street protests. Questions concerning Turkey’s democratic future are becoming increasingly louder and more distressing, especially if the country becomes unable to manage the inevitable tensions of a pluralist framework, tensions that have been aggravated by the catastrophe of neighboring Syria, the permanent conflict with the Kurds, and the

repercussions of the war against Daesh, in which Turkey has played a very inconsistent role for a long time. In the aftermath of the July 15, 2016 coup attempt all these dangers have intensified.

These observations are not off topic because the İstanbul seminars have, from the very beginning, served as an extraordinary observatory for the evolution of contemporary societies and political systems, of Arab countries and also European societies dealing with a close encounter with cultural and religious differences, with the challenges posed by globalization and mass migrations, as well as the appearance of multiple paths toward modernization. The first 15 years of the new century have been stormy but also filled with promise. An evolving Turkey moving closer to Europe was one of these promises, especially thanks to its capacity to present itself to Arab countries as a possible reformist and successful solution for Arab nations compared to the harsh alternatives of secular authoritarianism or religious extremism, of secular dictatorships and Islamic theocracies. Should the failure of such a promise be complete, access to democracy and pluralism for Arab countries would suffer renewed and perhaps indefinite delays. The fate of Turkish democracy itself would appear to be in jeopardy. The Tunisian exception, an isolated democracy in the Arab world, proves that there is another way and that, as acknowledged splendidly in the motivation for the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to the country's civil society, this way involves dialogue, compromise, and a considered agreement between secular political movements and religious political ones.

The acknowledgment of religion's re-emergence and powerful role in the public sphere is a characteristic of the post-secular imprint that the İstanbul seminars assumed during the first meeting in 2008, inaugurated by the post-secular philosopher Jürgen Habermas, with a paper that is not published here because it can be accessed on our online journal, *Reset-DoC*.<sup>1</sup> The subject of the relationship between religion and politics, religion and the law, and religion and science is central to any reflection on the contemporary world, in particular for those wishing to nurture the prospect of cross-cultural dialogue and pluralism, to oppose processes involving the radicalization of identity that so often fuel faith. This is the orientation of our work. We believe it is important everywhere and a clear, urgent priority for the Muslim world, from which our seminars have tried to call on the most important speakers to draw pluralist, dialogic, and inclusive inspiration capable of establishing a solid base for an internal critique of extremism within Islamic culture and religion. Among them, in particular, I would like to mention Nasr Abu Zayd, who died prematurely in 2010, after a life spent in exile far from his beloved Egypt and who accompanied our association's first steps as well as those of the İstanbul seminars. He leaves us his voice, one of the seeds of a possible and better future, a future we would like see, which is rich in cultural diversities yet capable of coexisting well together.

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, A "post-secular" society. What does that mean? Available at: <http://www.reset-doc.org/story/00000000926>. 2008.

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