



*Initiatives of Change*

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## **International Caux conferences 2009**

### **Opening of the conference 'Learning to Live in a Multicultural World'**

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After studying in London for three years – between 1888 and 1891, when he was going from 18 to 21 – my grandfather Gandhi wrote a guide for Indian students wishing to study in England in which he quoted with approval the phrase, 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do.'

People from India who went to study in America in the 1960s and 1970s Americanized their names. Many Indians with long and complicated names (not long and complicated for Indians) became Harry or Dave or Roger or Manny or whatever. People from anywhere going to live in Japan or Thailand took Japanese or Thai names.

This sort of thing is far less common now. Yet though the world has changed a lot in recent decades, the truth in the maxim about Rome has not disappeared. It makes practical sense to respect the new culture in which we hope to create a new home and a new life. But the newcomer is no longer exotic; in many places he is she is quite abundant and is sometimes seen as over-abundant.

How newcomers to Rome can adapt to Rome and live in a mutually beneficial partnership with Romans is a difficult question in many parts of the world. Thus Bangladeshis and Nepalis come in immense numbers to live and work in India. Mexicans and other Latin Americans come in very large numbers to the USA. I need not speak to you of what is happening in Europe.

But newcomers to Rome also influence the way Romans live. The way in which Romans live is an evolving, growing thing. Indeed 'Rome' is a changing thing, so is 'India' or 'America' or 'Europe'.

Angela Mattli has asked me to summarize my experiences in intercultural dialogue, particularly my experiences in reconciliation work in the Kashmir conflict. She has also asked me to give my definition of an honest intercultural dialogue, and to mention specific tools which helped me in enhancing trust between different cultures.

Clearly she carries an attractive image of my accomplishments. I would not like to shatter that pleasing image, but we all know that the Kashmir conflict has not ended, though it is certainly true that violence there has come down. If I am to be honest, the reduction in violence in Kashmir has had more to do with developments in the region around Kashmir and less to do with the reconciliation work in which many including me have been engaged over Kashmir.

Intercultural dialogue is a useful phrase but not a precise one. The Kashmir conflict is more political, historical, economic and religious than cultural, although I realize that 'cultural' is often understood as 'religious'. Most Kashmiris will tell you that Kashmiri culture is above all a culture of peace; and many Indians and Pakistanis and Kashmiris will say that their cultures have much in common. Some will even say that there is a culture common to Indians, Pakistanis and Kashmiris.



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But there has been conflict in Kashmir for 62 years, for political, historical, economic, and religious reasons, and also, thankfully, periods of truce or peace or verbal war or low-intensity clashes. But I will point out one major lesson from the dialogues over Kashmir that I have taken part in. Differences within the talking sides – the Indian side, the Pakistani side, or the Kashmiri side – have often been at least as great as differences between the three sides.

I mention this because the same is probably true of dialogues initiated to reconcile other conflicts. If the leaders of the different factions that claim to speak for the Kashmiri people can come together for a common platform and identify representatives entitled to speak for them, the Kashmir dialogues would become far more successful.

Personality clashes and power struggles or power hunger have ruined many a grand cause and prolonged many a bitter conflict. This has been true of some other bitter conflicts that I have been engaged with or followed closely: among the Nagas in the Northeast of India, among the Tamils of Sri Lanka, and elsewhere.

What is my definition of an honest intercultural dialogue? Seemingly straightforward questions like this are usually quite tricky and a wise professor should avoid them. Yet where angels and the wise will stand aside, let me rush in. To my mind a promising intercultural dialogue is where the participants are willing to look at the conflict or dispute or disagreement from the point of view of the opposite side. Frankness in expressing my point of view is only partial honesty –if I am really honest, I must admit that the opposite side has a wholly different view. I must be willing, indeed eager, to see and hear that view.

Do I use the time when the opposite side is talking to polish my next arrow, or do I really listen? Am I open to the element of truth in what the opposite side says? Angela Mattli asked me to describe the tools that might have helped me in reconciliation efforts. The most effective tool – I don't say I am good at using it – is attentive listening. I think our attitude is more important – it is deadlier than our expertise.

Often a breakthrough occurred not because I thought of something inspired but because my colleague on my side thought of it. An excessive love of my idea or formulation is the surest way of killing a fragile consensus.

The death of any unique human culture, or its dissolution into some kind of universal monochrome monolingual culture, would surely be a loss for all of us. But the segregation of cultures is perhaps not a very good idea. Fifty years ago, in this very house, a British Member of Parliament was both horrified and shocked to find that he was rooming with me, a strange man with a strange colour and a strange religion from a strange part of the world. But, thanks to the spirit of this place, he became my friend.

Two years before that, I was rooming with a young white South African in the city of Atlanta in the South of the United States when I received a telegram that my father had had a heart attack and then heard over the phone that he had died. The death of my father, who had been born in Durban, South Africa, where my father had joined his father's fight against racial



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discrimination, deepened the intercultural bond that was developing between the white South African and me.

But rooming together does not always help. My grandfather, the famous Gandhi, was quite horrified when in March 1908 his roommates in the South African prison to which he was sent for his civil disobedience threatened to assault him. These were African cellmates convicted for crimes. But Gandhi, 39 at the time, overcame the negativity, the fear and the prejudice, that the experience produced in him. Two months later, speaking at the YMCA in Johannesburg, of the different races living in South Africa, he said:

If we look into the future, is not the heritage we have to leave to posterity that all the different races commingle and produce a civilization that perhaps the world has not yet seen? (18 May 1908, 8: 323)

I think he would approve of the spirit of Mountain House and of this Intercultural Dialogue.

Recently the government and armed forces of Sri Lanka claimed that they have extinguished the rebellion that disrupted life and peace in Sri Lanka for more than thirty years. The end of killing is always welcome, and there is a major lesson from Sri Lanka on the ultimate failure of a method that kills the innocent for the sake of a cause. Yet we hope also, in Sri Lanka and every country, for the end of any notion of high-and-low, the end of first-class citizens and second-class citizens, of minorities living at the mercy of majorities.

Some wounds go deep. I will never forget what a Sri Lankan Tamil once said to me, comparing South Africa and Sri Lanka. This was in 1985, several years before apartheid ended in South Africa. Insisting that the situation in Sri Lanka was tougher than that in South Africa, this Sri Lankan Tamil said: 'In South Africa the problem is skin-deep; in Sri Lanka it is soul-deep.'

To outside observers, a Sri Lankan speaker of Sinhala and a Sri Lankan Tamil look rather alike. Social scientists say that inter-marriage between Sinhala-speakers and Tamil-speakers have taken place for centuries. Many Hindu Tamils worship the Buddha, and many Buddhist Sinhala-speakers go to Hindu temples.

And yet the divide was regarded and by some is still regarded as soul-deep. Can our intercultural dialogues enter deep inside the mind and soul of the people opposite? What tools can help with that?

- Attentive listening, respect, understanding,
- Rejection of fear and prejudice,
- Awareness that our fates are tied together,
- Awareness that our children will pay the price if hurts and hates are fuelled,
- Examples from situations similar to ours,
- A study of the deepest beliefs of our adversaries from their point of view,
- An acknowledgment of, and apology for, wrongs done by our side,
- A willingness to confront negative attitudes from our side,
- A study of the language or languages of the people we want to, or need to, befriend.



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Sometimes I think that art, music and drama are needed when prose fails, which is often the case.

In my own life, what helped a little in the bid to bring Hindus and Muslims closer to one another was a book that tried, as sincerely as possible, to understand 8 prominent Muslim leaders of the region that includes today's India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Some of these leaders were strong opponents of mainstream Indian positions and points of view. But I presented their side of the disputes as fairly as I could, as also the differences that others in India, Hindus as well as Muslims, had with these eminent Muslim leaders.

To my surprise and relief, the book has been widely welcomed by Hindus and Muslims. Though written more than 20 years ago, it remains in print. A new Indian edition is likely to come out before long. What gave me particular delight was that a Pakistani edition, in the Urdu language, was published without any reference to me or consultation with me. At least in the minds of some of its tens of thousands of readers, this study has perhaps reduced mistrust and aided reconciliation.

Now that I have done what Angela asked me to do, I can conclude. May your reflections on education, on how to deal with the past, on the fundamental rights of human beings, and on diversity management assist all those working for a good future for Europe and the world.