

# Why East and West need each other

At a time when some are predicting increasing conflict between Western and Muslim nations, Abdul-Nabi Isstaif writes from Damascus with a call for partnership.

**T**here is an Arabic proverb which reads: 'Man is the enemy of that of which he is ignorant'. How can we remove this enmity from our lives?

According to Arabic culture and society, the answer to this question seems obvious: the key which opens the door to healthy and amicable relations between us and our surroundings is 'to know'. The question is whether 'knowing' can be carried out individually or collectively, and whether it is a one-way street.

We would all agree that knowing must start with the self. Knowing oneself is the best way to achieve inner peace. But can one know oneself without the other? The answer is a big 'no'. I cannot even see my own face, head or back without the help of a set of mirrors. It is only with the mediation of another person that I can form a more rounded picture of myself.

## Partnership

The other person has the same problem: he needs me to acquire knowledge of himself. So a partnership can be formed, which will help us both to gain a more complete picture of ourselves. This exchange of knowledge can create a strong bond. It places us on a basis of equality and creates an environment where each party's existence, wellbeing, safety and prosperity are secure.

It is impossible to know oneself without the help of another person. And it is also impossible to construct an identity, which is distinct from other identities, without the presence of those other identities. For identity is always defined by difference. 'It is only through relation to the other, the relation to what it is not, that the positive meaning of any term—and thus its identity—can



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be constructed,' writes Stuart Hall.

Identity is a complex mixture of several collective identities. According to Anthony D Smith, 'Human beings have a wide variety of possible collective affiliations—economic and occupational groups, leisure and welfare associations, age and gender categories, territorial and political organizations, as well as families and cultural communities. With all of these, individuals can simultaneously identify, moving with relative ease from one

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to another, as circumstances demand. We may be wives or husbands, manual workers, members of a religious community, ethnic group, regional association, or whatever, each of which may become relevant in certain situations and for certain purposes. As a result, we have multiple identities, ranging from the most intimate family circle to the widest, the human species.'

In fact, human identity is so inclusive that it contains within itself a multitude of diverse selves, any of which may dominate according to the circumstances. An Arabic phrase captures this conception: 'You think that you are merely a small planet, while the whole great cosmos is folded within you.'

In short, it is in the presence of, and through partnership with, the other, that man knows himself and constructs his identity. He articulates it through a medium whose very existence is indebted to the other, his mother tongue.

In addition to this partnership between the self and the other, there is a long-standing and far-reaching form of partnership which transcends all linguistic, national, regional and temporal boundaries. This is the partnership among the diverse nations, peoples and ethnicities of humankind.

## Fabricated myth

Civilizations may be named after one language, one nation, one people, one region or one age. But they are the product of the partnership between different nations, peoples, areas and ages. There is no single civilization in human history which is not indebted to other civilizations. Hybridity has been the governing force of all human achievements. In this context purity is a fabricated myth which we can do without.

Our knowledge of ourselves, our identities and our civilizations stems from an implicit partnership between 'I' and 'you' on the individual level and between 'we' and 'they' on the collective level. This partnership has always aimed at producing, advancing and disseminating knowledge of ourselves and of the world.

It is high time that this implicit partnership became explicit. Rather than feeding the notion of clash or conflict between the self and the other, or between peoples, nations and civilizations, we should call for partnership at all levels. The resulting knowledge of the world should be employed to serve mankind, irrespective of race, colour, religion, sex or age.

This notion of partnership between peoples from east and west, south and north takes for granted that no one should have a monopoly over any part of human knowledge. As Abu al-'Ala' al-Ma'arri once prayed, 'May rain never fall on me or my land unless it covers the whole country.'

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