

Dialogue and Identity

Thought for the Day

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Did you know that 2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialogue?

No? I didn't think so!

This project has been so low key that it's almost invisible, though it's certainly needed – research for the EU found that fewer than half of us have any regular contact with people of other ethnicities, or religions, or even nationalities.

So isn't it obvious that intercultural dialogue is better than pouring fuel on the so-called clash of cultures? Yet the project is mired in controversy, particularly about whether faith is part of culture and so whether interfaith dialogue should be included. One MEP objected to “old men in dresses” being invited to address the European Parliament – a very strange remark in the context of respect for others!

- Perhaps for some people, intercultural dialogue is only a good thing if they are allowed to preselect the cultures with which to dialogue!

Surely the first rule of any dialogue is to accept the other party on his or her own terms. If, as research has shown, a majority of Scottish Pakistanis think of themselves first as Muslims, they are neither right nor wrong – that's just a fact that the rest of us need to be aware of when our paths cross.

On the other hand our differences should not determine all our interactions. I must admit to being appalled by some of the commentary on the US election that saw the candidates solely in terms of skin colour or gender. When Obama's opponents put it about that he's a Muslim, they didn't insult Obama, they insulted the intelligence of the electorate – but so did his supporters when they called that a “slur”!

Yesterday I received an e-mail from a friend who used to be Bush's Under Secretary of Defence. He said he opposes Obama's policies, but he's proud of his country. I just hope that what he's proud of isn't that his country took sides in identity politics, but that it rejected identity politics, and judged the candidates on their merits. If so, then perhaps an important change has indeed begun.

Ephraim Borowski

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