

The university experience, a way to meet the Other: A Lebanese Case

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Summary

The objective of this presentation is to show, based on a case study, the role universities can play in creating an adequate atmosphere for intercultural dialogue in a pluralistic human environment such as Lebanon. Having in mind the multi-confessional adherence of Lebanon's population, our aim is to show that universities face serious problems in trying to introduce a culture of tolerance and conviviality. However, these difficulties may be overcome if the adopted curriculum is chosen to enhance knowledge of the "other", and if the espoused university life is practiced in such a way as to help in establishing common values leading to a better national understanding.

The Lebanese Background

Geographically speaking, Lebanon has a privileged position on the East side of the Mediterranean Sea. This location has given this small country a distinctive importance by being at the crossroad of The East and The West at the cultural, economical and political levels. For centuries the population of this country, whose borders were fixed only in 1922, was a moving and changing one. The actual profile is still undefined for demographic reasons and this has an immediate impact on both the political atmosphere and the political behavior of Lebanon. At the same time this fact gives to the Universities working in Lebanon a specific role. I will start by clarifying this background in order to comprehend the actual situation of these universities, and the importance of the actions they are called upon to undertake. The case of the University of Balamand will be used to illustrate this role, and to help us come to a conclusion which may be useful for other countries at the present time.

The Lebanese Population

Citizens belonging to eighteen different religious confessions form the Lebanese population today. What is important to stress here is that belonging to a confession is part of the Lebanese identity because by virtue of belonging to one of these confessions ensures the citizen of his or her own civil rights. This very particular status makes some

people uncomfortable, but they cannot escape it: they will marry as..., vote as.. and die as... Belonging to a religious confession is not a personal matter but it links the citizen to the political system. This explains why the religious discourse may become very dangerous if it does not take into consideration the national interests and gives the national unity a top priority.

The Lebanese Political System

The Lebanese political system is based on creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding and national cooperation between the citizens taking into consideration their religious affiliations. Starting with the independence in 1943, the successive governments did not succeed to eradicate this religious basis of the system. After the civil war 1975-1990 this system was definitively structured to take into consideration the confessional adherence of the citizens in the civil service, and for the first time the Lebanese Constitution was driven by what we call in Lebanon “confessionalism”.

“Confessionalism” and “Democracy”

This new political orientation raised a new paradigm at the national level: Is harmony possible between “confessionalism” and “Democracy”? If yes, how? While Democracy recognizes the total equality between citizens, Confessionalism gives the priority to the religious denomination. This conflict is a big enough issue that it has resulted in an on going debate in the country concerning the results of the elections, and on the concepts of minority versus majority etc. Each confession is trying under these conditions to defend its privileges even if this may be harmful to the country. Citizens live an unhealthy atmosphere because of the tension created by this polemic fact. What can universities do in this encounter?

Role of Universities in Lebanon

As microcosms of the nation, universities in Lebanon live this political evolution and have to deal with its consequences in their day to day life. Some Lebanese leaders think that universities bear part of the responsibility for the actual political situation because they did not fulfill their role as a “positive changing catalyst” from 1943 to 1975. Why

do political and community leaders, mainly graduates of these universities, stay indifferent to the political shift occurring in Lebanon? A shift which is moving the country from a state working for a full democratic state, to a state whose constitution is religiously driven? What may explain the fact that the discourse of university graduates did not help to bring about a better understanding between the citizens and did not lead to an efficient convivial political system?

The University Tradition in Lebanon

In order to be aware of the basis of this questioning it is worthy to note that the university tradition in Lebanon goes back to the middle of the nineteenth century, and was until 1955, dominated by private institutions with religious background, a fact that had an important cultural effect not only in Lebanon but also in the Arab Region as a whole. At the same time, the Lebanese universities were the forums for freedom, language renewal, and critical thinking. Many political parties of Lebanon and the Arab Region were founded by graduates of these universities. Up to 1968, these universities presented a space for tolerance, intercultural dialogue and the emergence of new political and social ideas.

The period from 1968¹ to 1975² transformed this atmosphere. Religious background of the universities began to become ferment for a new discourse with less tolerance and more aggressiveness toward the other citizens, based on the political position identification, and the religious affiliation. The vocabulary used in universities shifted from a nation driven one, to an accusative and intolerant one. This drastic change was very harmful to the country, but how do we explain it?

The Universities' Population

The universities in Lebanon are located mainly in the Larger Beirut³ area. Until 1988, no full fledged university campus was established in North Lebanon. This means that the universities' population was constituted from the different Lebanese regions and from different religious backgrounds. But at the same time, and beginning with 1968 the

¹ This is the year the Palestinian Resistance was founded. Because of the massive presence of Palestinians refugees in Lebanon, their political presence in some universities was very active.

² The Lebanese civil war began in 1975 and ended in 1990.

³ Beirut, the Capital of Lebanon, lies midway on the Lebanese coastline.

population of each university started to become more religiously uniform, taking shape according to the region where the university was located⁴. The general atmosphere encouraged the universities' population to support partisan positions and was a fertile ground for an ideological discourse calling for more aggressive attitudes toward others. This helped greatly the different militias in recruiting their supporters in the different universities. The era of debate, conviviality, and fruitful dialogue ended for a while. Were the universities, because of the way they faced the problem, responsible for that?

The Problems faced by Universities

The sudden changes which occurred by the beginning of 1968, came too fast. Administrators did not see the change coming and were not ready for that. The universities curricula were classical ones, and nothing in them prepared the students to face adequately and critically the political and religious discourse they were exposed to. At the same time the deterioration of the political situation in the country in terms of religious reference for citizenship did not help universities to take a stand vis-à-vis the cleavage created in the student body.

At that time, this was no more an issue of good will. No immediate action was possible, and no fall back plan existed as such. Universities tried at that time to have different campuses: one (or more) in each region! This was one of the saddest periods for the Higher Education in Lebanon because it had a negative impact on the quality of teaching, the national sentiments at the universities, and the leading role that these institutions are called upon to play at the national level. Was this the end of the golden era of the universities' role in Lebanon?

Balamand: A Case Study

In spite of the eighteen years of war, many Lebanese still had confidence in the future of Lebanon as a unique multicultural experience. Even when the religious environment of the country favored and supported internal division, there were still those who were committed and willing to work for the resurrection of Lebanon. One of the main

⁴ At the American University of Beirut (located in the Western part of city), the majority of the student body became Muslim, mainly Shiite, while at the Saint Joseph University (located in the Eastern part), the majority became Christian, mainly Maronites..

religious confessions⁵ in Lebanon took the lead in showing that it was a good time to prepare for the common future, starting where peaceful relations were possible. The decision was made, in 1988, at the highest level of this denomination, to found a new higher education institution in Lebanon, the University Of Balamand (UOB).

A Brief History

One of the most important aspects of this decision was the building of a full fledged campus outside the Greater Beirut area, in North Lebanon, in an area where Muslims and Christians live in a very convivial way, and where the impact of the war was slightly different from elsewhere. Starting with three faculties in 1988, twenty years later, finds UOB with nine faculties, three research centers and two off campus programs. Out of the twenty-five universities in Lebanon, UOB is the fourth largest private university in terms of student population. It has established excellent cooperation programs with foreign universities and is currently working on establishing a continuing quality assurance process. UOB implemented, from the very beginning, a nondiscriminatory policy towards students, faculty and staff recruitment. This is why the student population and the academic body are as diversified as the Lebanese population, a fact that gives UOB a privileged position when considering the conviviality issue.

The Cultural Background

It is important to stress the cultural background of UOB. The initiative of the founders was driven by the openness of the Confession to which they belong, the role this Confession played in the history of the region in terms of building bridges between all the existing confessions, and by having a long experience in intercultural and inter-religious dialog. Believers of this Confession exist and live peacefully not only in Lebanon but in all the countries of the region. This background by itself gave rise to a climate of confidence. But the general atmosphere in Lebanon, at that time, was still very unfriendly and suspicious. This is why; this historical heritage was not enough to overcome the overwhelming difficulties of dialog and conviviality. The good will was there, but the challenges were enormous.

⁵ This confession is the Christian Orthodox Church of Antioch.

The Vision and the Role

The UOB founders had, from the very beginning, a clear vision of the role of this new institution. It had to make a difference in showing that conviviality is still possible in Lebanon and that a higher education institution can play a positive role in the future of Lebanon. The non-discriminatory policy was not the only guideline given to the new university administration. The UOB was asked to adopt an aggressive action plan to try to implement this vision within its student body, and to play a leading role within its sister institutions to rediscover the spirit of unity and brotherhood which was prevailing some eighteen years ago. This was the mandate on the national and cultural level. Aiming for excellence was the academic support for such actions, because the UOB had to gain the confidence of the academic community as a new comer in the educational system in Lebanon.

The Means

Based on these premises, UOB took a number of actions to cover all the possible facets of the challenge. Some of these actions were academic and were implemented immediately. Some other actions were institutional and needed a more extensive preparatory period. Finally, there was a need for a process linking UOB to other actors in Lebanon and abroad who had the same objectives. In the following, we will try to emphasize the specificity of each type of activity in order to be able to assess this work objectively.

Academic Actions

As an academic institution, it was obvious that UOB had to look at its curricula and try to adopt policies, which will support its vision in terms of conviviality and inter-cultural dialog. Three main orientations were presented and implemented:

- 1 - A compulsory course (for all university students) on Christianity and Islam was designed to be part of the Cultural Studies program of the university. The objective of the course was to let Lebanese youth get to know each other thoroughly and objectively, not through wrong images developed within

communities by fundamentalist groups. This course calls for critical thinking, open debate, and mutual understanding.

2 – A master's program in Christian Muslim Studies was implemented to give room for students from different confessions in Lebanon, to study together on a graduate level issues related to their common understanding of conviviality, inter-culturally exchange, and co-responsibility of the nation's future.

3 – A series of graduate summer courses and seminars are regularly run, in the presence of internationally renowned personalities from Christian and Muslim backgrounds. The objective of such seminars is still to focus on a specific theme and to develop it from different angles. People who are asked to participate in these seminars are from different backgrounds, and come to live together fully for ten to twelve days.

Institutional Actions

As mentioned earlier, in order to ensure the continuity of these actions, and the enhancement of their academic standards, UOB took two main institutional actions:

1 – The UOB founded an Institute for History, Archeology, and Near Eastern Heritage (IHANEH). The aim of this institute is to study the common heritage of the region through working and studying of historical documents (manuscripts, archives, architecture, fine art, music). IHANEH called for a number of international seminars where Christian and Muslim specialists came together to study their common history in order to build their common future on the basis of a better understanding. IHANEH published a number of books, which are a witness to its role in the academic environment. It also publishes the peer reviewed historical journal, *CHRONOS*.

2 – UOB founded also the Center for Christian-Muslim Studies (CCMS) whose role is to focus on cultural and social issues directly related to the conviviality, particularly in Lebanon. An observatory to watch this conviviality was installed, with a special focus on the evolvement of the conviviality indicators in Lebanon. CCMS is also in charge of organizing academic activities and keeping in touch with similar centers all over the world. CCMS also organizes regularly series of lectures about current hot themes. CCMS publishes scholarly works of

researchers from Lebanon and the Arab World that directly related to the Christian-Muslim dialog.

National and International Relations

UOB considered that focusing on national and international relations was part of its vision. But after September 11, the inter-cultural dialog assumed, all over the world, a new dimension. UOB was ready to cooperate with sister institutions all over the world to launch an intensive and efficient dialog process based on experiences (with local partners), in an open minded approach, and scientific research (teaming researchers from Lebanon and abroad). Visiting scholars, exchanging students and professors, participating in international forums, and supervising theses in local or foreign universities, represent activities that enhanced the expertise of the UOB in this domain.

Success Stories

Twenty years after the founding of UOB, the general social and political background in Lebanon has changed drastically. More wars, more fundamentalism, and more cleavage are making the task of the universities more difficult. Did the UOB initiatives have any effect on its students, on its internal atmosphere, or at the national level? To answer these questions I will try to look at each type of action that we implemented.

On the academic level, the actions helped UOB to maintain a healthy atmosphere within the student body. Hot issues are debated in class or during public lectures. (This helps to respond to the questions which are raised in the public sphere, in an objective and scientific approach). Visiting lecturers from different cultural and religious backgrounds, in the seminars and in the MA courses, give these academic actions an added value due to the openness and transparency of the university's dealing with the inter-cultural issues. The different subjects of the theses (Biology, Political Science, Theology, Languages, and Literature) presented in the MA program reflect the extent of the interest in this program.

At the institutional level, the two established centers proved to be reliable research centers. 11 international seminars, 52 peer reviewed publications, and 3 ongoing research programs are the results of joint academic efforts between scholars from Lebanon and abroad focusing on the inter-cultural issues. Because of these actions,

UOB has gained an important expertise in the field and is becoming an internal forum for such debates.

Finally, and because of this expertise, UOB scholars and the UOB centers are solicited to participate in international seminars and forums and are taking an active part in the elaboration of documents related to inter-cultural issues and inter-religious dialogs.

Failures and Challenges

However, at the same time, the UOB actions failed here and there to reach their objectives and they still have to face many challenges. In terms of failures, one can say that:

- 1 - UOB failed to create, within the student body, an effective current capable of eradicating, in the future, the national political debate fueled by the confessional issues. Adopting a neutral position is not the aim of the university educational program. Proactive actions are needed to launch a social transformation.
- 2 – The number of students joining the MA programs offered under the IHANEH and the CMCS is low, while the need for such specialists in the country and in the region is very high.
- 3 – The atmosphere in the seminars was sometimes disrupted by fundamentalists who did not cooperate in launching of, and maintaining a healthy debate.
- 4 – UOB publications do not reach a large public. The ideas highly appreciated by the academic body, nationally and internationally, so far, have not had the desired impact.
- 5 – The prevailing political atmosphere in Lebanon is not helping UOB to attract international students and scholars to come and work with their Lebanese colleagues on inter-cultural issues.

What are the challenges facing us? Some challenges are internal, for example: We will have to maintain our positive actions and not be discouraged by the failures we have encountered, and we will have to revisit some of our policies in order to make a better impact in our social environment. Some other challenges are external and we will have to have a plan for facing them. For example: How to create a greater interest in the

society in the inter-religious dialog and inter-cultural debate? How to reach some social circles and get them involved in the university action plan, mainly in the civil society? How to incorporate the social actors in the university actions in order to enhance their impact?

Conclusion

The efforts of UOB in the Lebanese encounter show that universities can have a leading role in prompting the society to create an atmosphere suitable for tackling debatable issues in a very healthy way. Adopting problem-solving programs, encouraging critical thinking attitudes, and implementing inter-cultural courses, are some of the means of enhancing conviviality in a country like Lebanon. The universities will have to be role models in their internal life, and have to make their student body experience the positive impact of dialog to better know the other who is different. The UOB case is an incentive for sister institutions to launch aggressive policies to implement societal actions for inter-cultural dialogs.

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