



**Inauguration of the academic year 2009-2010  
for the Catalan university system**

## **The challenges to understanding: a bridge or drifting**

Mustapha Cherif

<http://www.uoc.edu/inaugural09/eng/cherif.pdf>

Presentation  
**Inaugural speech of the academic year 2009-2010  
for the Catalan university system**

Imma Tubella, UOC President

# Inaugural speech of the academic year 2009-2010 for the Catalan university system

Imma Tubella

This academic year, the UOC is celebrating its 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary and is extremely honoured and takes great pleasure in starting this celebration with this solemn event. It is the best birthday present that we could have had. Thank you so much.

Although very briefly, I would like to extend my very warmest thanks to the UOC teaching and research staff, management personnel and to the students and graduates, to our community as a whole, for the outstanding work they have done during the 2008-2009 academic year, summarised in the report presented by our General Secretary, which paints a picture of a progressive university, open to ideas, to people, to the region. A university deeply rooted in Catalonia and also wide-open to the world.

I would like to take just a brief moment to tell you why I suggested this inaugural paper to Professor Cherif: because he is an old colleague and friend and because I admire his work, his thoughts and his action, as it is not easy to be a staunch defender of *opening, an open and tolerant Islam* in the context in which he lives. Also, and most especially, I thought of him as he is a member of the UOC community, one of our lecturers. He is the Director of the Master's in Islamic and Arabic Studies, one of the Master's courses that this year will be the starting point for our global and multilingual campus, and which enjoys the collaboration of around fifteen top-flight lecturers from all the Maghreb countries, France and Belgium. We currently have students from Europe, the Maghreb and even America studying on this new course and which, as Professor Cherif said, proves that knowledge has no borders.

I would like to state here that this Master's is the result of the concern shown by Catalan Government Minister Huguet regarding the Maghreb. He suggested to me that internationalisation towards Latin America was good, but that we should also consider our neighbours in North Africa, with whom we share a sea, an ancestral bond of relationships, culture and also our country, as many of them live here in Catalonia.

With this introduction now complete, I should like to briefly look at two points and put a few final considerations on the table:

1. The first point is the transforming role that education plays
2. The second is the need for change at universities
3. And a brief conclusion that will help us focus on the future

## 1. The transforming role of education

As regards the first point, the transforming role of education, if we really do feel that our country needs a new pattern of growth and that the university is a powerful instrument for innovation and a factor for well-being, we need to put it at the centre of the social debate and provide it with the necessary resources to help it deal with the challenges it faces. In short: it is time that we made educational excellence a national priority. The future of us as a country is at stake and there is little time to lose.

What I have just said is no sudden revelation on a warm summer night. Some countries started on this path many years ago: the United States, Great Britain and France, but in a clear and definite way and as a fundamental part of their national project, Dubai, Korea, and Singapore, and, since the start of September, Finland.

Constructing a new economy, transforming society or fighting for equality needs the support of the knowledge and involvement of the university. We cannot construct a national project based solely on history, as it also needs quality of life for its inhabitants. In any event, our history is strewn with examples that show that a nation does not need to be big or economically or militarily powerful to be influential. Change does not usually come from natural resources. It comes from ideas and these ideas from soundly educated people.

Even though we are not interested in transforming the model of the nation, it is in times of economic and, let's not forget, social crisis when there is a more definite need to invest in quality education for people, it is the best strategy geared towards favouring their employment opportunities, their future well-being and the well-being of society as a whole.

It is precisely in these moments, moments of crisis, when everyone looks towards the education system as a whole, when it feels the pressure of a society worried about maintaining its standard of living and social conquests that it has achieved through great effort. The education system in turn looks towards public authorities, concerned with the funding problems that are characteristic of the overall economic crisis. But as Joan Guinovart said in a recent interview, "if we feel education and research are expensive, let's see how far we get with ignorance and mediocrity".

Today, and more specifically in our environment, problems with education tend to boil down to quantitative issues: bigger budgets, more lecturers, more or fewer credits, and more or less education. However, I feel that the answer goes beyond investing more public money in the education system (which is also true). It's a question of being brave and innovative, as we are part of a society that is transforming at high speed and that also requires new answers to educational challenges. We need education over a longer period of time, we need to provide better education and we need to educate more people, and to achieve this, the university also needs to change. We cannot deal with the challenges facing us if we do not know how to make the education system an agent for innovation.

As a result, the aim of higher education is, or should be, to improve people's quality of life because it contributes to the development of people, of society and of the economy. We should not forget that all the studies and reports conducted by all kinds of institutions worldwide state very clearly that in the twenty-first century the economically powerful nations will be the ones that have been able to transform themselves into learning societies, the ones that have made lifelong learning their central objective. In order to achieve this, they will need educational institutions that are both strong and flexible, enabling them to adapt to the new situation and new demands, because the university has to meet society's demands, which is not the same as meeting market demands.

I believe that we have the necessary consensus regarding the need to change towards a knowledge-based economy and the crisis offers us a golden opportunity to do this. However, we will not achieve it if we do not have a national strategy geared towards strengthening research and innovation and enterprising universities aimed at academic excellence.

However, we cannot transform society if we do not first transform the university and this leads me on to my second point.

## 2. The need for change at universities

Over the last academic year, I have attended a number of international meetings with ministers, presidents and managers of educational institutions from around the world. At every meeting, concern was raised regarding the change in the type of students going to university.

Our young people under 25 have grown up in an era where mobile phones, the internet, Twitter and Facebook are as normal as fridges were for us. This interactive immersion during a formative stage in their lives has affected the way they think and learn.

There is an ever-growing division between the learning model offered by universities (schools and institutes) and the natural way our digitally proficient young people learn. The indicator as to what is happening comes from the United States, where attendances at master classes are falling. As a result, this year the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) has closed the large Physics lecture halls and has replaced them with smaller and practical seminars. I urge you to log on to YouTube and look for one of the fantastic classes given by Dutch astrophysicist Walter Lewin. The first video I watched had been seen by around 250,000 people. It was a master class given in a lecture hall that was practically empty. By way of contrast, however, his same courses broadcast on cable TV by the University of Washington in Seattle have been seen by over 4 million people, and at the MIT, his Introduction to Physics course is followed by 40,000 people every month via access to OpenCourseWare. However, I should reiterate that his classes which previously had 500 or 600 students now have 10, with luck. This is the trend at all high-level universities in the United States.

Children of the digital age want a more interactive education. They learn differently, in a non-sequential, asynchronous, multitasking and collaborative way and they demand a lecturer who is more of a mentor than a sole repository of knowledge. This happens in primary, secondary and higher education. Students want and need another type of teaching, and if we ignore them, they will end up ignoring us. Now more than ever do the words of Montaigne make sense: "Sooner a head well-formed, than a head well-filled."

It is now time that we, the universities, realise that we no longer have the monopoly and that we should accept that the web has become the dominant access infrastructure to knowledge, while also being the container and global platform of exchange between people. One example of the many for which we find references to both teaching and research is the Academic Earth portal. On Academic Earth, eight US universities of excellence –Berkeley, Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Stanford, UCLA, Yale and the National Institute of Health– offer open courses on the web which students can study anywhere in the world without any difficulty. Their aim is to offer everyone excellent, open and free higher education through an educational ecosystem that provides surfers around the world with easy and interactive access to master classes given by the leading lecturers. Students grade the courses and grade the lecturers, make contributions and to a certain extent become opinion-makers.

Academic Earth came into operation during a test period on 18 January 2009. During the first six weeks, it received 409,050 hits. Its users spend an average of 27.04 minutes a hit, an eternity in internet terms. Academic Earth has been nominated by Time magazine for the 2009 Website of the Year.

The university cannot live with its back to its students, more and more of whom are increasingly calling for reforms or real change.

They believe that education is essentially an interactive and transactional process. We therefore need to open the door and move on to new student-focused learning methodologies that are integrating and accessible, cooperative and which get the most out of the strategic use of digital technologies. Without our

realising, ICT has changed aspects throughout the academic field and I am sure that they will change many more and not because we at universities or in the government have planned it this way. Our students are leading the way in terms of change with their everyday practices and in most cases they have done so despite our resistance.

I am therefore convinced that the great force that will change the university will be the practices of digital students, and if I'm not wrong, we either listen to them and change the educational model and transform governing structures, or they will change them for us.

### 3. Conclusion: Focusing on the future

In a recent and highly controversial article in the New York Times, Mark Taylor, lecturer at Columbia University, stated that the majority of US universities produce a product for which there is no market and develop skills for which there is no demand, carry out research in hyper-specialised fields and publish articles in journals read only by colleagues who think the same as they do and who ultimately are only concerned with padding out their CV. And all this at an increasingly higher price.

The article was harshly criticised by one part of academia, and I mention it here because it ties in nicely with the concerns, for example, of such respected figures as Edgar Morin, who in his latest books defends a return to the Middle Ages. Returning to the *universitas magistrorum et scholarum*, to the community of lecturers and students, one that is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, collaborative and interactive, where there is no distinction between the fields of knowledge, disciplines, sciences, which produces minds incapable of relating knowledge, of recognising global and fundamental problems and of facing up to the challenges of the complexity of our societies.

The reality is that there is a growing, more profound and serious lack of adaptation among our fields of knowledge that have been separated, shattered and broken down into disciplines, and, on the other hand, the increasingly interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, multidimensional, transnational, global and planetary realities and problems.

Morin believes that this reform will only come about through education, although unfortunately our education system would have to change to be able to reform. This is because Morin is talking of a return to the Middle Ages from the point of view of concept, of philosophy. He is also, however, talking about abandoning the Middle Ages from the point of view of how our institutions are structured.

In short, voices can be heard throughout the world and on every forum saying that we need to reform higher education, we

need an in-depth debate as to what universities we want for the network society and for students in the twenty-first century, for digital students.

Knowledge is one of those rare creatures that multiplies, grows and becomes richer when shared and, as another member of our community says in his latest book, Professor Castells, we are living in a society based not on sharing culture, but on the culture of sharing. And if we want to see an example of this, we should look at what our young people are doing on the internet and see how they manage collective intelligence.

We need to know where to start and the start can only be anti-conventional and marginal. The modern university, which broke from the traditions of the mediaeval university, has its roots at the beginning of the nineteenth century in Berlin, the capital of a small peripheral nation: Prussia. It subsequently spread through Europe and the world. We now need to reform it and this reform will also start in a peripheral and marginal way. I am convinced that after having analysed the trends and great international debates in depth, that the university of the future will be open and collaborative, or it will not exist at all.

Each university must have a clear idea of its priorities and its identity and must be open to collaboration at once.

Catalonia is an ideal place for experimenting. We have a complete and diverse system, with twelve public and private, general and regional, on-site and virtual universities, with prestigious and wide-ranging research centres. As a whole, the Catalan university system is recognised as an innovative system that has incorporated learning methodologies and assessment systems that have spearheaded the way throughout Europe and the world. We have a prestigious Quality Agency, are able to attract foreign students and we can very easily be trilingual.

We have a great opportunity of leading the necessary university transformation and by doing so we can help transform the country. However, there is no time to lose, because if we do not do it, either others will because the knowledge business is an attractive one, or our young people will. In fact, both groups have already started.

So what do we have to do to make this happen? I see only one solution, a solution that Ortega put forward one hundred years ago in his short work, *The University of the Masses*: "Overturn the university", or to put it another way, *transform the university*. Because, as Einstein wrote, "don't expect things to change if we keep doing the same things over and over again".

President, distinguished minister, colleagues. Thank you very much and here's to a good academic year!

Imma Tubella  
UOC President

# The challenges to understanding: a bridge or drifting

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## Abstract

Whilst, on the one hand, the pace of globalisation increases and the West gains the upper hand in terms of knowledge, the concentration of wealth and the tools of power, its understanding of its neighbours to the south is almost non-existent. On the other, the Muslim world, despite its advantages and diverse nature, remains politically underdeveloped and fails to give sufficient priority to understanding. Lack thereof is one of the main causes of underdevelopment, of mutual distrust, of insufficient exchanges and of conflict. The responsibility for overcoming the challenges to understanding is shared. In these times of new information technologies, the question of knowledge is one for academics and politicians, and affects the future of society. The debate is no longer between a liberal West and a traditional East, but rather consists of becoming aware that there are no longer any borders. We need to be equipped with theoretical models which allow us to understand the peculiarities and subtleties of the culture of others, and to seek synthesis or co-existence. The need to bolster universities in their mission to impart critical, independent and free knowledge is one of the great challenges of our time. It is possible to reinvent shared values. Mutual understanding is the most beautiful and most solid of bridges.

## Keywords

understanding, Islam, Muslim world, West, globalisation, modernity, justice

Whilst, on the one hand, the pace of globalisation increases and the West gains the upper hand in terms of knowledge, the concentration of wealth and the tools of power, its understanding of its neighbours to the south is almost non-existent. On the other, the Muslim world, despite its advantages and diverse nature, remains politically underdeveloped and fails to give sufficient priority to understanding. Lack thereof is one of the main causes of underdevelopment, of mutual distrust, of insufficient exchanges and of conflict. The responsibility for overcoming the challenges to understanding is shared. Everybody avoids critical debate of current issues. Denial of reality is the underlying note of the dominant discourse. Mutual misunderstanding is the norm between the two shores of the Mediterranean: each public sees only the violence of the other, the reasons for which it does not

understand. Nevertheless, there is an ancient trans-cultural web of relations which reveals the existence of deep-rooted links and a possible awareness of "the other". Bearing in mind the fact that the future must be shared if there is to be one at all, there is a need for guidance with regard to reciprocity of rights and duties, aiming for mutual understanding and debate, the best ways of ensuring a more open world, to build bridges and create symbiosis, and achieve thereby things that cannot be attained individually. All this, however, without giving in to drifting.

In the political arena, Western countries and the institutions linking them are stable and being perfected. The West is still the source for the rules of and concepts underlying the management of international relations. Nevertheless, the multifaceted crisis, the imbalances and difficulties in combining ethics and efficiency,

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plurality and unity, justice and wealth mean that emphasis has to be placed on understanding, to learn from everyone and to take into account the values of each individual to pave the way for the world of tomorrow. Some politicians rightly claim that there can be no peace without justice, but without understanding neither will be possible: nothing is neutral. Promoting understanding is a strategy for long-term success, as understanding is one of those strange things that grows and is enriched when shared.

The progress of science<sup>1</sup> has allowed man to put an end to the discourse of modernity,<sup>2</sup> which aims to provide a definitive explanation and a single direction for human history,<sup>3</sup> experience and knowledge. Modern knowledge's discourse on the emancipation of man based solely on material progress, rationality and liberalism is arguable and argued. Knowledge cannot be reduced to unifying, integrative information/merchandise. Generally speaking, Western thought regards its values, points of reference and rules concerning the individual and society, time, space, law and relations with others to be the only valid ones, but these values cause problems for other cultures. This is why it is important to seek common values, a universal horizon. In other words, to accept the right to be different, the right to criticise, to grant citizenship to unique histories, to languages old and new, to aid in the fight against injustice, to allow others to express the fact that they are different and to help achieve what is most essential: the ability to live together in harmony.

The crisis of democracy, of the university, the technological transformations of knowledge and the translation of understanding into vast amounts of information lead to a questioning of the status of knowledge in the societies of the future. Computerisation leads to a reconsideration of the transformation of knowledge and its political consequences. Some modern philosophers rightly raise key questions such as: "Who decides what knowledge is and who knows what should be decided upon?"

In these times of new information technologies, the question of knowledge is one for academics and politicians, and affects the future of society. It is not limited to choosing between "technological" or "critical" knowledge. The issue of understanding is a social problem that cannot be restricted to specialists, but is of concern to everyone. The debate is no longer between a liberal West and a traditional East, but rather consists of becoming aware that there are no longer any borders. Together, we must create an open community that combines feeling with logic, progress with authenticity. There is a twin latent risk in this. The first is thinking that there is only one valid model, that only what is calculable, profitable and efficient is true. The second is to believe that tradition alone is enough to save and exalt humanity. In both cases there is drifting.

So, the time has come to consider the singularities, peculiarities and differences that can form part of "the universal". The purpose of real understanding is to re-establish the logic of the right to be different, and also that of balance. Does the era of new technologies represent an opportunity for working towards

a more open world – as the UOC does – or it is, instead, a way to accelerate the process of levelling out, increasing uniformity, drifting that is prejudicial to all? We must all remain vigilant to ensure that developments do not take a wrong turn.

In such a context, the Muslim world, which participated in the West's Judeo-Islamic-Christian past and played its part in the emergence of the European Renaissance, deserves to be rediscovered to ensure that political, economic and cultural relations between the two shores are beneficial for all. Without strategies to develop policies of understanding, the obstacles will remain insurmountable. Bearing in mind that it is close, boasts a heritage of civilisation, possesses 60% of energy reserves and occupies an important geostrategic location, unawareness of the Muslim world is incomprehensible. The teaching of Arabic and Islamic Studies in Europe is clearly on the retreat. In the Muslim world, teaching is often subject to a traditional focus. The voice of an Islam worthy of its loftiest traditions, not of "moderate" Islam (a poor description), but rather the Islam of interpretation, knowledge, of the dignity of thought, is rarely heard.

Islamic civilisation, which brings together one out of every five people on the planet – of all races, cultures and countries – is poorly understood, despite the erudite works of the Orientalists and Islamists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. For seven centuries (from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup>), Islam was the dominant civilisation in the cultural arena. The subject of controversy and immersed in political and security-related problems, the Muslim world demands to be studied in depth. The shared future of Islam and Western countries, the relations between the two shores of the Mediterranean, the duty to bolster knowledge to foster understanding, all this requires urgent priority to be given to the scientific teaching of religion and civilisation. So, rather than seeing the south as a threat due to some of its weaknesses and drifting, it should be regarded as a partner capable of participating in the construction of a transmodernity, a just world order and a new universal civilisation.

The West, for example, thinks that it knows that Islam, in its hierarchy of power, places religion above politics, men above women and dogma above reason, hiding the scientific and humanist spirit that has inspired this world for centuries. This is a complete contradiction in terms. Calling themselves the *middle communities*, Muslim cities aim to combine the positive aspects of modernity with their own ethical, moral and spiritual values. They aim to correct, together, the drifting of inflexible religion and soulless science, untamed liberalism and intolerant atheism, which are dehumanising. This holistic focus on life, the desire for synthesis and consistency, is not totalitarian but is instead concerned with consistency, as noted by leading Spanish Islamic experts such as Miguel Asín Palacios and Juan Vernet.

Today, there is a crisis in understanding. In both North and South, the belief that they alone are possessors of the sole truth leads to drifting. Knowledge becomes an instrument of power whose use is restricted to the select few. We are witnessing a process of acceleration of intolerance. The truth exists, but nobody

1. [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Histoire\\_des\\_sciences](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Histoire_des_sciences)  
2. <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modernit%C3%A9>  
3. <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Histoire>

has a monopoly over it, no-one has the right to impose it or appropriate it. We are not dealing with relativism. The search for a new transmodern civilisation by means of understanding and knowledge needs this civilisation to respect the right to be different and to remember its cultural roots to be able to enjoy a successful future.

In a globalised world that imposes centralisation rather than decentralisation, a single type of knowledge rather than plural understanding open to debate, a globalisation that is not a synthesis of everyone's contributions but rather a hegemony, there is an urgent need to keep alive the idea of responsible freedom through dialogue and mutual understanding. Because the search for understanding itself deals with freedom, so that nobody can impose their unique point of view. For example, the globalisation of insecurity is often seen in terms of its effects, rather than its causes – ignorance, injustice and manipulation. We need an understanding that can resolve problems rather than making them worse.

So, the act of opening up is crucial. Catalonia, a place of welcome, the land of Ramon Llull and all those proud of their roots, which hosts the headquarters of the Union for the Mediterranean – a prolongation of the Barcelona Euro-Mediterranean process – provides examples of openness every day. The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (Open University of Catalonia, UOC) is a living symbol of this, with its courses focusing on the world and the future. The starting of a master's degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies in this academic year 2009-2010 is a brilliant reflection of this daring, wise and responsible policy.

There is no doubt that the time has come for opening up, for dialogue and for watchfulness. Given the risks of dehumanisation, injustice, uncertainty and threats, world opinion is becoming concerned. Researchers have a duty to listen to society and the world, not to console, but to raise awareness, answer questions, illuminate, build bridges. Without questioning the achievements of the modern world, they believe they have the right to take a critical look at its drifting. Without questioning the benefits of religion, they also have the right to take a critical look at the drifting of tradition. The modern values of the West, based on secularism, democracy and capitalism, have a dimension that other societies, including Muslim ones, can adopt, but not without conditions, nor blindly, since they do not necessarily constitute the best answer to the world's problems.

The cultural values of different peoples are equally respectable, unless they take on the retrograde form of a system that opposes freedom. How, then, can secularism be respected without breaking the link and unbalancing the relationship between life's different dimensions? How can there be common, public participation in the search for truth, beauty and justice, over which nobody has a monopoly, without helping cause a multi-faceted return to intolerance? How can individual independence be bolstered without weakening social links and the sense of belonging? How can liberalism and the market economy be integrated without harming social justice? Both backward-looking ideals of the societies of the South and today's disagreements cause problems. How can these issues be solved? How can we preserve justice, the right to criticise and the right to be different? The answers to these questions can only come from debating, exchanging views

and listening. We need to be equipped with theoretical models which allow us to understand the peculiarities and subtleties of the culture of others, and to seek synthesis or co-existence. This is what we need.

The worrying fact is that the right to criticise is on the retreat. Muslims, who represent a kind of endurance, took part – and can still do so – in the civilisation of the city. For centuries, they humanised social relations and continue to keep forms thereof alive today. The plurality of world visions and the right to criticise should be seen as riches. Our common source, the values of Abraham, are (contrary to what the prejudiced may claim) one of the sources of democracy and humanism. The centuries of the enlightenment and scientific revolutions have set them on a specific, ambivalent course, which has led to some of the cul-de-sacs that can be seen today.

The Western world view is problematic as it leads to significant dysfunctions that barely conceal the violence imposed in the name of liberal progress. This dominant model gives rise to forms of dependency, dehumanisation and imbalance that more than cancel out progress and opportunity. Problematic, too, are the backward-looking ideals, blind violence and closed nature of the societies of the South, tempted to find refuge in religion. Everyone tends to misinterpret and misshape different cultures through the prism of their own prejudices and their own value system, seeking superiority in a state of intellectual near-blindness, incapable of broadening their view and putting themselves in the other's place. This is not the effort that is required to achieve true understanding.

There is a need to put an end to the isolation of our worlds through mutual understanding, to open up, to travel, to allow ourselves to change, without diluting what we are or becoming depersonalised. Each and every one of us must be prepared to revisit our own inheritance and evolving identity and those of the other. To deconstruct the West's view of Islam and the Muslim view of the West. It is no longer possible to just accuse the other and deny them the right to criticise. Humankind has a calling for freedom, for reconciled humanity and the circulation of understanding, and not for ignorance, exclusion and oppression. What is at stake is our common being, our ability to live together, our very future. The issues of sense and justice remain open. Our future requires the elites to put mutual understanding into practice, as never before has the world been so unjust, unequal or violent.

Politicians, scientists and humanists on both shores aim to refute the propaganda of confrontation, so harmful to all, to build bridges, dialogue, to favour sharing and solidarity, find a way to return to Judeo-Arab and Muslim-Christian friendship, friendship between human beings, whatever the individual's origins and convictions. Despite this, the blindness of extremists and those defending narrow interests on both sides disturb humanity. Language and understanding have difficulties in translating reality with a view to correcting its drifting and transforming the world. Today's ideological framework and concepts do not favour the act of thinking or acceptance of the other. It is vital to increase our efforts in the field of circulating knowledge to prevent confrontations between peoples. The need to bolster universities in their mission to impart critical, independent and free knowledge is

one of the great challenges of our time. There is a need to renew our theoretical knowledge to face up to the challenges.

The geographic map of the world and the type of society imposed do not take into account people's aspirations. The two worlds, East and West, intertwined, interrelated, cannot prevent the problems of the one impacting upon the other. The West and the Muslim world have no real dialogue and do not negotiate enough. At the same time, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is facing complex challenges: in the field of politics, democracy; in economics, living standards, employment and energy; and, in the cultural arena, identities and sacred symbols. From a theoretical point of view, when one takes on the responsibility for managing the future, there is a need for putting an end, by means of understanding, to nurtured and amplified fear and arrogance, both bad influences. The wise person must raise awareness, help overcome clichés with regard to threats and risks, and check details, the factors in play and the equations. See what none of us can see in ourselves and in the other.

With regard to current challenges, mention must be made of the great changes in the world. The first factor that has changed since one thousand years ago, as already noted by Ibn Khaldun, is the increase in population. This means significant migrations. There is a need to respond to the challenges of immigration, citizenship and multiculturalism. The second change is the system of consumption of the economically-developed world. Growth destroys nature. The third change, which began five centuries ago, is the monopoly of the tools of power: the West, which regards itself as the centre of the world, manages the rest of it as something peripheral. Meanwhile, Arab societies are weakened by bad government, inequalities and a lack of education.

As far as the key area of understanding is concerned, what is worrying in the dominant world is the questioning of the possibility

of thinking. Today's world, defined as it is by its technical character, aims to master life's aspects by means of instrumental reason, using the results of exact sciences. This leads to marginalisation of criticism and plurality. There is a clear difficulty in accepting the right to intercultural and interreligious difference, and yet no-one is monolithic, as we all carry within us a part of the other.

To conclude, the old totalitarian formulas of "everything is religious" and "everything is political" have changed to "nothing is religious, nothing is political, and everything is merchandise"! The West will provide a good example if it favours mutual understanding, multilateralism and the consolidation of the rule of law to find a new common civilisation. This is a shared responsibility. If we have lofty ambitions and aspire to having compassion for all, we must learn to understand everyone, to be fair and to appreciate each individual for what they are. It is of crucial importance to relearn how to understand and love the other and accept questioning oneself to consolidate achievements and correct drifts. It is possible to reinvent shared values. Mutual understanding is the most beautiful and most solid of bridges.

## — Links

Mustapha Cherif's blog

<http://mustapha-cherif.net/>

Inaugural lecture web site

<http://www.uoc.edu/inaugural09/>

UOC's Arabic and Islamic Studies

[http://www.uoc.edu/masters/eng/master/web/estudis\\_islamic\\_arabs/estudis\\_islamic\\_arabs/](http://www.uoc.edu/masters/eng/master/web/estudis_islamic_arabs/estudis_islamic_arabs/)

### Recommended Reference

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<<http://www.uoc.edu/inaugural09/eng/cherif.pdf>>



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