

**Keynote to the Participants of the
Young Europeans' Seminar
Abdul Hadi Christian H. Hoffmann
Wehrbellinsee, June 26th, 2004**

Dear participants,

when Muslims are starting an event they begin with some verses of the Qur'an. I know that most of you are not Muslims, but since this weekend we shall discuss Islam in many different aspects I thought it might be appropriate to start our meeting with the first sura, called "Fâtiha":

"In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

Praise be to God,

The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds;

Most Gracious, Most Merciful;

Master of the Day of Judgment.

Thee do we worship,

And Thine aid we seek.

Show us the straight way,

The way of those on whom

Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace,

Those whose (portion)

Is not wrath,

And who go not astray."

You have come here today after a year in a foreign country staying with a partner family to talk about your experiences before you go home. This here is a time between two phases of your lives and this situation reminded me of a poem by T. S. Eliot, in which he is speaking about the "still point".

"At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor
fleshless;

Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance
is,

But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,

Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement
from nor towards,

Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still
point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

From: Burnt Norton, Four Quartets, by T. S. Eliot, Faber and Faber, London

In these lines T. S. Eliot, American, who was to take British citizenship, Unitarian, who became an Anglican, a man with multiple identities, describes the still point, without which we never would recognise movement, which he calls the dance.

It could be the dance of the molecules or the dance around the golden calf, or the dance of our daily rituals.

You, the participants of YES have come here to hopefully experience your still point after a year of many emotional experiences, intellectual challenges... We all are gathered here far from the busy hum of the great cities and hopefully this will enable us to focus, to look clearly at what is really important in our lives.

We shall be dealing with the religion of Islam, and already the introductory film has offered many questions, but also a specific point of entry: the piece of cloth that is in everybody's mind right now, the hijab or scarf.

However before we loose ourselves in details I would like to share with you another poem, which hopefully opens your hearts and minds for a much broader approach: It was written by the great Persian poet Hafiz in the 14th century:

Why Just Ask the Donkey

Why

Just ask the donkey in me to speak to the donkey in you,
When I have so many other beautiful birds inside
That are all longing to say something wonderful
And exciting to your heart?

Let's open all the locked doors upon our eyes
That keep us from knowing the intelligence

That begets love
And a more lively and satisfying conversation
With the friend.

Let's turn loose our golden falcons
So that they can meet in the sky
Where our spirits belong -
Necking like two hot kids.

Let's hold hands and get drunk near the sun
And sing sweet songs to God
Until He joins us with a few notes
From His own sublime lute and drum.

If you have a better idea
Of how to pass a lonely night
After your glands may have performed
All their little magic
Then speak up sweetheart, speak up, for all the world will listen

Why just bring your donkey to me asking for stale hay
And a boring conference with the idiot
In regards to this precious matter -
Such a precious matter as Love,

When I have so many other divine animals
And brilliant colored birds inside
That are longing
To so sweetly
Greet
You!

Obviously this is a love poem, and you may ask yourselves what has "love got to do with it?" - it being Islam and Europe.

Yes it is about love, but it also is about much more.

Yes this poem is about love, but we should be aware it is about love and not sex (and drugs and rock and roll...) and here at this still point I think we should turn our thoughts just for a second to love and what it can mean in our lives:

“Let’s hold hands and get drunk near the sun and sing sweet songs to God until He joins us with a few notes from His own sublime lute and drum.” Love is a gift from God, and never are we closer to God than when we are in love. New life comes out of true love. And it is here that we should understand how much more important love is than short sexual encounters. First we have a quick drink, then we have fast food, then we have fast sex, and then we have indigestion, this cannot be it.

But the poem has a much deeper meaning: Hafiz tells us not to limit ourselves to donkey talk, he encourages us to “turn loose our golden falcons so that they can meet in the sky where our spirits belong” - Indeed when we talk about Islam (and other religions and politics for that matter) let us not limit ourselves to “dos” and “don’ts”, to rules and minor details, let us focus on the “many other beautiful birds inside that are all longing to say something wonderful and exciting to your heart”.

Islam is a revelation, it is about God, it is about brotherhood and peace, its beauty lies in the uniqueness of the scripture, its calligraphy, in the music of its recital. Praying for Muslims means to come to the still point of their lives five times every day and go back to the world refreshed and with new energy.

Let us not talk to the donkey and limit ourselves to narrow concepts of nationalism, racism, and other -isms. Let us always remember, there is only one God and all men are created equal!

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Let me close with a personal remark: This poem was given to me by a friend, a very special man, whom I consider to be my mentor. Being a citizen of the USA he would be called politically correct “Afro American” – which he really is not: His father was from Jamaica and his mother from France, he has light brown skin and glacier blue eyes, and all his life he suffered because of this. As he wrote in his autobiography: “Too dark to be accepted by whites and too light to be trusted by my own people I always had to run from both sides when there was a riot.”

The moment of truth between us came, when I mentioned the history of the West being the history of dead-white-males: He looked at me startled and asked: "You are white, how can you speak like this?" And my answer was that as a Muslim in Germany I had learnt what it means to be part of a minority, something nobody had prepared me for. And we both understood that though being different, we were equals: that we have multiple identities and that we do not fit into our societies.

Therefore I urge you, when you go home after this experience here, do not loose yourselves in the details of everyday work, try to keep focused on the essentials:

- Enjoy whatever pleasure you may find in religion and spiritual guidance!
- Fight to preserve the freedom of religion, in politics and everyday life!
- And struggle to make this world save for diversity!