

## EDITORIAL

### “Faiths and Social cohesion”

## Establishing social participation with religious differences: local Muslim communities in Europe

Altay Manço and Spyros Amoranitis<sup>1</sup>

#### Abstract

The action entitled “Faiths and Social Cohesion” the results of which are presented in this volume is supported by the European Commission - Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs - within the framework of the European Programme against discrimination and in favour of fundamental social rights and the civil society (Art 13 of the treaty of the Union). This is an action for identification, validation and transnational exchanges “good practices” and information against discrimination coordinated by the Institute for Research, Training and Action on Migrations (IRFAM). This action is carried out at the transnational level with six sets of partners hailing from various countries

**Keywords:** Recognition of Islam, European Union, local government, religious discrimination, social cohesion

The action entitled “*Faiths and Social cohesion*” the results of which are presented in this volume is supported by the European Commission – Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs –

---

<sup>1</sup> *Altay Manço* is Associate Professor at the University of Liege, and Scientific Director of the Institute of Research, Training and Action about Migrations (IRFAM). Email: [amanco@irfam.org](mailto:amanco@irfam.org). *Spyros Amoranitis* is managing director of the Institute of Research, Training and Action about Migrations (IRFAM). Email: [samoránitis@irfam.org](mailto:samoránitis@irfam.org).

within the framework of the *European Programme against discrimination and in favour of fundamental social rights and the civil society (Art 13 of the treaty of the Union)*. This is an action for identification, validation and transnational exchanges “good practices” and information against discrimination coordinated by the *Institute for Research, Training and Action on Migrations (IRFAM)*. This action is carried out at the transnational level with six sets of partners hailing from various countries:

- In Spain: the Association of Intercultural Mediators in Spain (ASMINE) and the University of Granada in collaboration with the Municipality of Granada.

- In France: the association “D’un Monde à l’Autre” (DUMALA) in Tourcoing and the city of Roubaix, local associations as well as the “Groupe de Sociology des Religions et de la Laïcité” (GSRL) in Paris and the “Groupe d’Analyse des Politiques Publiques” (GAPP) in Cachan, these two groups are integrated into the National Scientific Research Centre (CNRS).

- In Italy: “l’Association de Recherches et d’Interventions” (PARSEC) in collaboration with the city of Rome and local groups.

- In Belgium: “les Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis” in Brussels, the University of Ghent, the Executive of the Muslims in Belgium (EMB) and the city of Visé, as well as various local associations.

- In Great Britain: Oxford University.

- Finally, outside of Europe, “l’Institut National de Recherche Scientifique” (INRS) in Montreal, Quebec, and the “Middle-East Studies Center” at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The global objective of this action is to highlight “good practices” in local governance that seek to manage religious diversity and thus, to better fight against religious and cultural discrimination to which the Muslim communities in Europe are exposed:

- Identification and the development of skills of associative actors, religious communities and communal institutions with regard to Community mediation, intercultural negotiation, social coordination, information, education and awareness building concerning religious and philosophical diversity; identification and support for agents of change and dissemination of the results.

- The concrete support for Muslims in Europe and the positive inscription of their religious and educational practices within their municipalities.

- The copying of these practices using comparisons taken from national cases with the objective of transferring them to other contexts.

- Publication and dissemination of the results of the experiments in the fight against religious discrimination.

The action entitled “Faiths and Social cohesion” thus opts for a strategy of investment and close follow-up of local actors in municipalities in order to gain fuller comprehension and co-operation. The experiments developed in European cities envisage the production of new, transnational know-how which has become necessary because of the effects of globalisation on our behaviour.

Action and observation at the local level make it possible to attain an in-depth level of knowledge and comprehension of those realities that are connected to discrimination against Muslims and Islam in small towns in Europe. In this way it is also possible to achieve practical knowledge on the most effective methods of intervention in order to overcome these blockages. Designed as a research-action, the concrete intervention of partner teams in municipalities and people under their jurisdictions contribute to identify and validate relevant practices in intercultural mediation, information, awareness building, consultation and collaboration at the intercommunity level in the fight against religious and other types of discrimination to which Muslims are exposed in Europe:

- Thus, the Spanish team, for example, opted for sociocultural mediation in order to create bonds between the Muslim communities themselves, and also between them, the leaders and non-Muslim inhabitants, as a way to overcome the difficulties of comprehension and suspicion with regard to the Muslims of Granada. It was also a question of following up on the starting up of the activities of a new mosque.

- In Italy, it was through an increase of exchanges, where on the one hand, the idea was to bring the Muslim inhabitants closer to the others, and, on the other, to see that the representatives of the Muslim communities came closer to the socio educational and medical services available in the city of Rome. Thus it was a ques-

tion of creating an atmosphere of mutual comprehension which is a guarantee in the fight against discrimination and stereotypes.

- In Roubaix, France, a systematic follow up was introduced and the role of “professional counsel” was achieved both with regard to the Municipality and the Muslim community with the idea of establishing a cultural complex for the Muslim population there, while respecting the laws of the Republic and the needs and specific expectations of the Muslim citizens.

- In Belgium, three sites have benefited from this type of work. In Ghent, a university structure working for the Muslim community has already been set up. It is a question of encouraging the local councillors to accept a certain number of changes in the dossier concerning burial rites. In Visé, (Liege), informal advice has been offered to the Muslim group in its relations with the local and supra-local authorities, as well as with other groups that exist within the territory. The reason for this mobilization is because of the historic nature of the establishment of the Turkish community in this locality. In Brussels, work was done on awareness building and setting up of a successful practice. It concerned the erection of a minaret for a mosque in Schaerbeek. This episode is presented in the form of an article, and could be used by other people who might find themselves in a similar situation.

- In Great Britain, work on regulations and popularisation through the media was possible using the results of statistical studies undertaken by Professor Ceri Peach from the department of social Geography at Oxford University. Having observed the behaviour of the town planning administrations in various cities over a historical period of several decades with regard to the applications made for setting up mosques, the C. Peach team discovered very great distortions in the way in which members of various religions were treated. Awareness with regard to and information on a particular type of injustice is the first step towards its elimination. When one examines the number of existing mosques in this country, one notes that this figure has progressed from only 7, in 1961, to 614, in 2001. If there seems to be certain saturation in these numbers compared to the size of the Muslim population at the moment, it must also be noted that the creation of great numbers of mosques in the past has been the cause of problems related to the system of urban development. The British project is dealing with this problem on the basis of a local case in Birmingham: it was a question of verifying the town planning dossiers to find out

whether the problems encountered by the Muslims wishing to set up mosques over the past 40 last years, were of a more serious nature than those of other members of other faiths. Indeed, it is noted that there are a higher number of administrative refusals for the creation of mosques than for places of worship for Sikhs, Hindus or Christians. However, the refusals were also made on the basis of the whole of nature of the end use of the projects: thus, the urban authorities in the city of Birmingham were, in the past, very opposed to the idea of transforming residential houses into mosques. On the other hand, they were very flexible when it came to the conversion of old churches, cinemas, libraries or swimming pools into places of prayer, even monumental ones, in so far as the local architectural styles were respected. Taking in to account the specific nature of daily prayers, Muslims are very much in favour of transforming houses into small places of worship near their dwelling places: in fact, the majority of the applications received from these people were for this type of project. Although the rules are applied to all in an identical manner, the need for Muslims to have a place of worship close to their dwellings has not been understood by the competent authorities, and the data that has been analysed thus far, points up to the fact that the members of this religion are victims of what one might term indirect discrimination.

- In Canada, Montreal, work is finally being done to mobilise persons in charge of Muslim associations and bring them together on a platform for hearing citizens' complaints and in this way, the wishes of this group are relayed to the political decision makers. For Professor Denise Helly of the INRS who is leading this project, it is a question of basing this work around a common denominator to overcome internal splits. However, the Canadian and British cases will unfortunately not be treated in more detail in the body of this work.

Our operational objective is thus to compare these practices and their contexts, and this is done thanks to the contribution of experts and specialists in immigration in charge of cross analyses and the production of political and concrete recommendations. Indeed, the diversified methods available to fight against discrimination produce different results according to the socio-political context and according to the precise objective being studied. It will thus be a question for us to produce an experiment and knowledge that is

validated on the means used to combat discrimination in different contexts.

This book is a sequel to and seeks to complete a first publication from the network “Faiths and Social cohesion” directed by Professor Ural Manço of the University of Saint-Louis in Brussels. This first book entitled *“Recognition and discrimination: presence of Islam in Western Europe and North America”*, published in 2004 in the same collection, shows that despite the existence of legislation that respects human rights, nowhere do Muslims enjoy freedom of worship without hindrances, when compared to the faithful in other religions. This is the point of departure and the observation made in this initial document which presents a progress report on the Muslim presence in the West: approximately thirteen million Muslims in Western Europe and nearly six million in North America participate in the life of our democratic societies. The Muslim presence mainly results from international migrations, but with the acceleration of naturalisation, the appearance of natives who have been converted and the advent of generations born in the West, it is no longer just due to migration. These people, who are believers and practise their religion, claim the right to live their religion in peace, dignity and legality. The Muslim identities and the Islamic practices of the future in Europe and America will undoubtedly be determined by the progress that will be achieved with regard to the question of general recognition of this faith. This in turn will determine the contour of local observations which will be examined in this volume.

The network “Faiths and Social cohesion” which functioned from 2001 to 2004, is also a series of six transnational meetings and three international conferences held in Rome, Granada and the final one organized in Liege on 21 September 2004 on the topic of the *“local Governance and religious diversity: the case of the Muslim faith in Europe and in Canada”*. This final meeting brought together all the partners and about 120 participants among whom there were social actors, political decision makers, administrative staff, those in charge of religious communities and students hailing from various countries. This work constitutes the revised acts and their modifications.

Several other productions in the form of books, booklets, press clippings or even on-line texts relating to local actions that have been carried out provide additional information on the project.

Lastly, the project "Faiths and Social cohesion" also proposes innovative ideas as regards products for dissemination: a documentary CD-ROM which sets out the stages in the realization of certain actions undertaken in the framework of this initiative. The realization of this document which has been entrusted to the journalist Mehmet Koksal aims to provide an outline of three years of research and actions carried out by a transnational and multidisciplinary team of researchers and social workers. The CD-ROM proposes to show the different stages of the international meetings, the realization of work on the problems, extracts of an international conference, filmed interviews of persons who gave personal accounts, and also the possibility of contacting specialists or consulting their Web sites. The results of the observations and actions seeking to fight against religious discrimination are thus presented in the form of summaries and diagrams. The subject matter is also illustrated with photographs.