

## **Religious discriminations and public policies: “Muslim burial areas” in Ghent**

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### **Abstract**

The goal of this local initiative is to identify through participative, long term observation (1995-2005) that has mediation as its starting point, to try and understand the methods of interaction between the Muslim communities and the local services and authorities, with regard to the needs of the Muslim population on the question of burials. It was necessary to perceive and analyze how the Muslim groups continued to evolve in time and how the city of Ghent and the services concerned reacted (or not) to the groups or the actors whom they recognized as legitimate partners in this dialogue.

**Keywords:** Ghent, Belgium, Muslim burials, local politics.

Ghent, a medieval city known for the Saint-Bavon cathedral and its towers, its Belfry and the church of Saint-Nicholas which dominate the panorama, has a population of 230 000 inhabitants, and is the second most important town in Flanders after Antwerp. The Muslim population in the city stands at 17 000 people, that is to say approximately 8 % of the total population. Two thirds of the Muslims in Ghent came originally from Turkey. This presence is the consequence of a “chain migration” from central Anatolia and, more precisely from the areas of Afyon and Konya. The Maghrebian community is made up of 3600 individuals, mainly originating from Morocco and especially in the Berber Rif area. The Algerians and Tunisians are 600 people (Manço and Kanmaz, 2002). The Muslim population is particularly concentrated in the north of the city, in the industrial and harbour area dating back to the 19th century, overlooking the canal which connects Ghent to the estu-

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ary of the river Scheldt. In the sixties, the Muslim immigrants were employed in the textile industry which at one time represented the prosperity of the city and was at the height of its glory between 1800 and 1930. The city has 13 mosques including 7 Turkish, 5 for the Arabic-speaking people and one for the Pakistanis.

One of the socio-political characteristics of Ghent is that it is a “secular region” whereas the majority of the Flemings are attached to the teachings of Catholicism. The municipal majority is thus traditionally secular (socialists and liberals) and the powerful Flemish Christian Democrat party is excluded from power. The first structural relations of the Municipality with the Muslim communities were entered into after the riots in May 1991 in Brussels which was the expression of revolt on the part of young people of Maghrebian origin who felt they were socially excluded. Before this date, the specific contacts were especially confined to some co-opted organizations, with the municipality choosing its own Muslim interlocutors<sup>33</sup>. A special cell in the communal police force was then charged to maintain a monthly relationship with the persons in charge of the mosques. A municipal service entrusted with integration was also created to deal with the inclusion of migrants with the objective of becoming a meeting and information point between the Muslims and the authorities.

Thus, towards the second half of the Nineties, the aspirations of the Muslim citizens were taken into account by the commune and things clearly improved. The change of attitude on the part of the municipal authorities was supported by several factors. As elsewhere in Belgium, the advent of an electorate of Muslim origin undoubtedly played a dominant role here, just like the democratic ideals of a new political generation. It will also be noted that the initiatives launched at the beginning of the Nineties started to bear fruit. Let us point out the creation in 1995 of the Forum for Equal rights and Interaction (FOGI) by secular Ghent intellectuals and teachers<sup>34</sup> of the Islamic religion in order to defend the social, cul-

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<sup>33</sup> The federation of Progressive Turkish Associations, as well as the biggest Turkish mosque in the city, for example; the first association was financially supported by the city, its woman director having become a senator in the Flemish socialist Party in 2001.

<sup>34</sup> Teachers of the Muslim religion have always played an important role both locally and nationally, in the institutionalisation and the organisation of Islam in Belgium. Moreover, Belgium has a long tradition of conflicts between the Catholics and Liberals which often took place in the teaching arena; the regulation of Islam in the public sphere in Belgium also went

tural and religious rights of the Muslims. The FOGI sought to construct a permanent consultative dialogue between the city (or other levels of power) and the representatives of the Ghent Muslims. One of its central objectives was the creation of an awareness that was in step with the social recognition of the Muslims in the city.

The FOGI was fighting for the following points (among others), so that the teaching organized by the Municipality:

- could be reformed in favour of an inter-cultural education;
- duly grant the right to wear the head scarf for those Muslim pupils who wished to do so;
- institute a school holiday to mark the end of the Ramadan fast and/or the festival of the sacrifice;
- exclude the holding of examinations during the month of Ramadan;
- examine the possibility of providing a choice of halâl food in the school canteens.

All these requests were heard by the City which stressed the importance of moving ahead in the matter. But two years of negotiations (1997 and 1999) did not produce any significant results. The failure of the negotiations seemed to be due to the reservations on the part of the Flemish Liberal Party (VLD), one of the partners in the communal coalition. If this situation was discouraging for the members of FOGI, one can say that as of the year 2000, the subjects related to Islam and the relationship with the ethnic and religious minorities appeared to be well placed in the concerns of the local municipal officials. Since 2003, the action of FOGI has links with a study centre at the University of Ghent and there is also the creation of a permanent Forum of all Ghent mosques which especially coordinate the organization of religious festivals (preparation of temporary slaughter houses, negotiation of a possibility of ritual slaughter<sup>35</sup> in residences, collecting the carcasses,

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through teaching. Teachers of the Islamic religion who are financed by the Belgian State have thus become leaders of their communities (Boender and Kanmaz, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> In 2003 the Muslim population in the provinces of Eastern and Western Flanders protested: despite the strict directives issued by the Flemish Health Ministry forbidding the slaughter of animals in homes, certain communes were tolerant in the matter, during the feast of the sacrifice,

information for the residents...). The Municipality which, as of the end of 1990, is in search of a permanent and democratic dialogue with the Muslim groups supported this forum and invited it, in 2003, to participate in exchanges with other non-religious associations. Apart from the FOGI and the Ghent Mosque Committee, these institutions are:

- Vereniging voor of Emancipatie in Ontwikkeling van Moslims (VOEM, Association for the emancipation and the development of Muslims);
- Unie van de Moskeeën in Islamitische Verenigingen Oost- en West-Vlaanderen (UMIVO, Union of Mosques and Islamic Organizations in Eastern and Western Flanders);
- and Centres for Islam in Europe, at the University of Ghent (CIE).

### **1. General objective and the realisation methods**

The purpose of the action launched by the FOGI and later on by the CIE was to fight against the most visible forms of discrimination against the Muslim communities, whether they were due to a question of identity or culture or pertaining to faith. Within this framework, the actors were always in favour of a structural and permanent dialogue between the authorities and the Muslim communities, adopting a two pronged approach to include the representatives and the communal institutions.

It was a question of encouraging the actors in the city to initiate contacts with the Muslim representatives; the major obstacle being the idea that the mosques would only play a religious role. The various contacts between mosques and local councillors made it possible for these priorities to evolve<sup>36</sup>. Those who were involved in these activities especially played a role of mediation and expertise, trying to generate confidence among the municipal authorities. The willingness to move ahead on the part of certain political

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whereas others, who were more rigid with the rules, did not offer a sufficient number of satisfactory alternatives to the Muslim population.

<sup>36</sup> In fact, from 1991 onwards, the city of Ghent opted for the creation of "an immigrant cell" in order to make contact with those officials responsible for the mosques. These contacts were not based on religious questions but rather on the theme of "living together" even if this was not always easy.

and administrative actors also facilitated the task of those involved. It should be noted that the subject of immigration plays an important role in public opinion and consequently, in the definition of the policies for the city. Even if much still remains to be done, the town of Ghent is regarded as a pilot city on the subject.

For the Muslim public, these steps were of even deeper significance. Certain authorities in the Muslim communities lived in a climate of mistrust as regards the Ghent authorities. The on going work sought especially to improve the capacity for dialogue and communication of the Muslim representatives. It was also a question of explaining the workings of the institutional mechanism, its slownesses, its prerogatives, its limits with regard to legal and political competences, its position between the local, regional and national levels, etc. The “traditional” and “non-professional” pattern of operation of immigrants’ associations also posed a problem, in particular, in their relationships with the authorities. The work achieved by the FOGI and the CIE at the level of those persons in charge of the Muslim community<sup>37</sup> can thus be characterized as being achieved in the area of information, support, development of capacities or know-how and, finally, exploiting the potential.

## **2. Muslim burial grounds in communal cemeteries: a specific action**

The goal of this local initiative is to identify through participative, long term observation (1995-2005) that has mediation as its starting point, to try and understand the methods of interaction between the Muslim communities and the local services and authorities, with regard to the needs of the Muslim population on the question of burials. It was necessary to perceive and analyze how the Muslim groups continued to evolve in time and how the city of Ghent and the services concerned reacted (or not) to the groups or

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<sup>37</sup> Repatriation of the dead is very costly (insurance, plane tickets, stay costs.). A system of “burial funds” exists within the Turkish associations (the members pay 30€ a year). A similar system organised by private Moroccan banks also exists. Repatriation of Tunisian Muslims is paid for by the Tunisian government. In cases where there is no insurance, the family covers the costs but can count on the generosity of the faithful. The estimated cost of a burial in the country of origin stands at 3000€.

the actors whom they recognized as legitimate partners in this dialogue.

Until recently, it was practically not possible in Ghent (as in the whole of the province of Eastern Flanders) to be buried according to Muslim rites. This discrimination is becoming increasingly intolerable insofar as the members of the Muslim communities are beginning to age. The integration of Muslims into Belgian society as full citizens requires also the possibility of being buried according to the rites agreed upon, in the city where the deceased lived for most of his life. This claim is not only religious in nature. The problem of the Muslim burial grounds is truly a humane question that the city understands and admits, in particular in its report dated 2003-2005 concerning the minorities.

The death of a Turkish woman on October 31, 2001 will be the occasion to point out certain difficulties. Thus the bereaved family publicly made reference to the absurdity of the repatriation of the remains of the deceased in a context of definitive post-migration installation, more than 30 years after the Ghent migration. The widower of the deceased woman, his children, his grandchildren and his great grandchildren all live in Ghent. The fact that the family vault is in Turkey, leads us to believe that the memory of the deceased woman will be always related to migration and, more pejoratively, to her status as a non-Ghent native. It must be stressed that there is almost no one left in Turkey for whom the tomb would mean something. According to custom, it is traditional that the close relations (family, friends, acquaintances, etc.) escort the mortal remains of the deceased to its final resting place. In concrete terms this means that the people directly concerned by the death are given one day's leave. But with the need to repatriate the body, the relatives are on leave for up to one week. However, it is not customary for workers to receive one week's leave apart from the annual holidays. Then there are the additional financial costs of the operation, even if systems of mutual insurance exist within the Muslim community. This brings in its wake tensions and multiple frustrations: only a few of the close relations can be present for the rites. Funerals are universally recognized as being an important link in the psychological process of mourning. The fact that many people are prevented from attending funerals of their close relations makes this process of mourning very complex and generates guilt feelings. It is obviously not possible to imagine that a family is lacking in its duty towards one of its members by having a burial ceremony where the rites are different to those

imposed by the Muslim religion. And one can imagine the feeling of absurdity which is increased by a factor of ten when the repatriation of the deceased concerned the mortal remains of a young Muslim born in Belgium<sup>38</sup>... The tensions that are present around this question can only develop in time with the increasing numbers of generations born in Europe: the need for structural rules is also made urgent by the fact that many Muslims cannot be repatriated to a country of origin: Belgian Muslims (for whom Belgium is the country of origin), those without official residence-papers, refugees, the destitute, mixed couples where one of the partners is of foreign origin, etc

The commune has thus promised to make contact with the Muslim communities, during 2003-2004 ("CIE" period), in order to find a satisfactory religious solution, within the framework of the possibilities envisaged by Belgian law and while respecting the denominational neutrality of the cemeteries. Since such a step was already taken in 1997 ("FOGI" period), it is therefore possible to compare, the two sessions of negotiation for purposes of analysis.

At the time of the negotiations that took place between the FOGI and the Municipality, an important point of friction appeared and concerned the setting up of a plot reserved for Islamic burials in a city cemetery. Other Flemish cities were also experiencing similar tensions during the same period. According to Belgian legislation the communes have sole discrimination in questions regarding burials. However, the secular majority in the Municipality, on principle, is opposed to the possibility of religious interference in the management of a public happening: cemeteries are open to all without distinction of any kind; if an Islamic specificity were to be introduced, it would be synonymous with discrimination towards other confessions or philosophies, and would create inequality between citizens. According to the commune, it would be a regrettable backward step flying in the face of the secular neutrality of public institutions: the time when the non-believers, non-baptized and freemasons were buried in common graves outside

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<sup>38</sup> The disappearance of Loubna Benaïssa and the subsequent discovery of her remains in 1997, in the wake of the Dutroux affair popularised the theme of Muslim burial grounds. This solidarity (even though it was short-lived) between native and immigrant populations who came together because of the suffering endured by the child martyrs, made the discriminations towards the Muslim populations more visible. In fact, in Belgium there are only four communes where Muslims can be buried according to their rites.

the cemeteries is still engraved in the memories of lay persons and therefore the communal management of cemeteries is regarded as progress to be defended at all costs.

To this, the FOGI responds that the impossibility of burying Muslims according to their religious rites is in itself, tantamount to exclusion of its people: without a Muslim cemetery, these people would not have the feeling of being integrated and recognised. The refusal on the part of the communes is equivalent to an expulsion of the deceased to his country of origin with the expenses involved to be paid by his close relatives who are thus also deprived of the possibility to meet regularly to visit the graves of their dead.

The law on burials and cemeteries dating back to 20 07 1971 stipulates the general conditions for the organization of funerals. A bill issued by the Ministry for Justice envisaged the opening of a debate with the Executive Committee for the Muslims in Belgium in order to find a solution to this problem. Nevertheless, a more recent bill proposed by the Council of Ministers in May 1997 made the question of the Muslim burial plots dependent on the results of a parliamentary debate, even though the recommendations of the Federal Minister of the Interior dating back to October 2000<sup>39</sup> encouraged the municipalities to consider the question anticipatively. At about the same time in Flanders, the regional Government also sent out a circular to all the communes in the region encouraging them to make arrangements for Muslim burial grounds in their cemeteries. Thus, in the action plan of Ghent for the ethnic and

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<sup>39</sup> Following are extracts from it: "The cemetery is neutral in character, no distinction or discrimination based on religion is allowed with regard to the circumstances of death" ... "The principle of equality allows Christians, Jews, Muslims, atheists and all others to be buried in communal cemeteries" "It is not contradictory or incompatible with the fundamental principles set out here that the commune provide separate grounds for specific groups, for example, the faithful belonging to one religion, so that graves sharing common characteristics can be grouped together" "Burial of the dead in such a burial ground is possible only this wish is clearly expressed by the defunct during his lifetime, or by his family or by any other person who can legitimately be in charge of the burial" ... "The plot cannot be isolated from the rest of the cemetery by any kind of physical partition" ... "The placing of the body in the coffin and the burial must be carried out in strict accordance with the rules on hygiene and public health" ... "It is not possible to obtain a burial plot for an unlimited period of time" (translated by the authors).

religious minorities (2003-2005)<sup>40</sup>, it is indeed announced, that the commune hopes to find a solution for Muslim burials. The number of administrative levels being involved in the question is not favourable for a speedy resolution of the problem, even though this indicates the positive attitude of the political decision makers. It will be noted that in this open public discussion which has been ongoing since 1997, the Muslims are never given a formal and systematic hearing. This necessarily creates misunderstandings, more especially so because the various Muslim groups do not have exactly the same practices.

Certain intellectuals have also taken up the debate. Thus, on March 11, 1997, Professor Vermeulen, during a radio broadcast, stated that Muslims could not be buried in Belgium because they: - wish to be buried “apart”; - wanted to be granted a lifelong burial plot and - do not want to be buried in a coffin. By pointing out the practice of the *waqf*, Vermeulen states that the islamization of cemeteries implies that this land will forever be lost to the State economy. This Flemish academic thinks he has observed no change of attitude with regard to these questions on the part of the Muslim community in Belgium. However on May 14, 1997, representatives of the Muslim community were able to put forward sufficient solutions from their point of view while respecting the law on burials of 1971, during a meeting in Ghent in the presence of FOGI, the Humanist Union of Ghent, the Municipal Services for Integration, and the Councillor for Social Affairs: burial in a coffin, in a space where the orientation of the graves is respected, the concession not having to be for life, if the descendants have the possibility of renewing it, indeed, the Muslim religious beliefs on death would permit allow the opening of the graves only in specific emergency situations.

However, the Mayor and the Councillors disagreed with the proposal to arrange for a Muslim burial ground within the city cemetery, because it would lead to a different interpretation of the laws concerned. The observers will however note that there is a divergence of policy between the socialist and liberal partners in the municipal coalition: the principal objections being focused around the interpretation of the principles of neutrality and equality which are inscribed in administrative law. The heart of the argument against the establishment of Muslim burial plots interprets the “neutrality of the State” as being the “secularity of the State”.

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<sup>40</sup> Available on <http://www.gent.be>

It will be also noted that there is a certain margin between a “theoretical Islam” and the realities that Muslims undergo in a minority situation: the dynamics concerning identity are always present, causing divergences sometimes important ones, even within Muslim groups. Thus, towards the end of the Nineties, associations and Muslim organizations of Ghent increased the number of the meetings that they held to reinforce their civic actions and to lessen the impact of their intracommunity differences: the objective is to speak in unison with a strong and coherent voice with the local authorities.

This episode coincides with the creation of the Committee of the mosques and the relations between local authorities and Muslim communities are becoming more and more direct, apart from the mediation by a third party like the FOGI, for example. This situation is encouraged by the local councillors. It is also true that the Muslim actors are beginning to understand how the town hall structures function and can thus try to launch an action without assistance.

The decade that started in 2000 saw the adoption of a new law on burials which are henceforth “regionalized” and have become the prerogative of the Flemish Region: the time thus appears favourable for a new debate on the subject. Very quickly, (January 16, 2004), the Interior Ministry for Flanders voted a decree seeking to make burials in a coffin optional, whereas this was imposed by the preceding legislation on grounds of public health. In this new decree, one of the wishes of the Muslims was thus taken care of. This law came into effect on July 1, 2004.

Information work was undertaken by the CIE before this law came into effect in order to give people the opportunity to go further in the debate on other dimensions of the question and, more generally, to revitalise the dialogue between Muslims and local councillors, so that finally, the implementation of a permanent discussion between the Forum for the mosques in Ghent and the persons representing the authorities might have a concrete and permanent link. This follow-up work which is based on the long term also allowed for the organization of a one day reflection process where the theme was the question of the Muslim burial plots.

After a resumption of contact with all the mosques and the public partners who were involved with the question of burials when it was abandoned in 1997, working sessions were organized. It was especially a question of pushing the Muslims in charge to find a

consensus and to present a coherent request to the authorities concerning the rites of Muslim burials. Several meetings were necessary during the course of which the representatives of the CIE led the discussions during the meetings, worked out agendas, explained the new Flemish law, and largely took part in the drafting of the dossier while especially helping to transpose the oral observations into written form, without however interfering in the contents. Those who took part in the exercise were the “facilitators”, “clarifiers” and “organizers”. With respect to the authorities, they especially played an expert role as regards anti-discrimination: if the concerns expressed by one of the communal authorities in connection with what became known as “apartheid after death” were legitimate, it should be understood that as long as the decisions are not applied, discrimination still exists with reference to the law of January 2004.

In addition to the communal authorities, three actors were particularly monitored and supported by the process: the president of a federation of Islamic associations, the spokesman of the Maghrebian mosques and the spokesman of the Turkish mosques. These people played a key role in all the negotiations: they received and transmitted information, done the ground work for the meetings, responded to questions, etc. The majority of the meetings were informal, thus making it possible to build confidence with regard to civic questions and to maintain a constant dialogue among the various partners.

The organization of a common event on April 3, 2004 is one of the highlights of the project: it is a study day on the subject of Muslim cemeteries which was honoured by the participation of the Flemish Minister for the Interior and the president of the Executive of the Muslims of Belgium. The objective of this day was to describe the problems in their complexity and to provoke an open debate thus making it possible to include the question of the cemeteries in the political agenda of the City. At the beginning it was a question of differentiating the various levels of the problem:

- questions of a theological and/or cultural nature or what exactly do the Muslims want?
- questions that were practical and legal in nature or what is feasible with regard to what is required?
- questions of a political nature or how to behave with regard to the municipal coalition?

The representatives of the Muslim communities thus wrote out a memorandum making a case for theological reasoning. The document was precise and clear, clarifying what the Muslims intended to request from the municipal services in terms of adjustment of Muslim burial plots (tombs facing in the direction of Mecca, which is the distinction between Muslim and other graves) and the religious rites to be carried out with regard to the deceased during the time the body is carried to the cemetery,... The objective of this exercise was to see that the religious request came as close as possible to the laws in force<sup>41</sup>.

The new decree and also certain old directives facilitated the task of adjustment of Muslim burial plots in the cemeteries. However the communes remain responsible for the cemeteries and the Muslim communities feel dependent on the goodwill of the local authorities, despite the existing legal apparatus.

These regulations and laws are interpreted differently by the various ideological currents present in the city centre. The concept of "neutrality" still poses problems and is strictly interpreted within the framework of separation between the Church and the State. According to the director of the integration services in the city, the debate is stalemated. This is in line with the general political concept on "the edification of a secular State": one of the tendencies present is to perceive separation between religion and State as being absolute, and therefore any religious concept must be relegated to the private sphere, or even the individual one. The

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<sup>41</sup> Seen from the Muslim point of view, separate burial plots in cemeteries are preferable for the members of different cults and beliefs. But as to how this can be done is a question that is open to debate: if some want a small wall, others talk about a plot that is quite separate from other plots, hedged in by bushes. However, all the Muslims who took part in the debates were clearly in favour of a clear separation between Muslim and non Muslim tombs. According to one of them: "We prefer a place that is clearly marked out where we can say our prayers without bothering others" However, some Muslims, especially those resident in Europe think that Muslims who live on this continent are in a situation of 'darura' or necessity and can therefore make exceptions to Islamic laws. This opens the door to possible concessions on the part of Muslims, even though the Muslims of Europe have the right to benefit from structural solutions with regard to their needs in the context of their faith. They should be able to decide for themselves which exceptions are acceptable and which are non-negotiable, as they see it and not based on the classical interpretation of their faith. What is impossible to change, are, for example, the rules concerning the preparation of the body and the ritual prayers of the janaza.

alternative vision is to regard the State as being responsible for organizing the management of differences, particularly religious differences. The problem of cemeteries cannot consequently be solved without a consensus on the definition of local governance which is secular. Within this framework, the Muslim community finds it difficult to understand that the perception of certain decision makers remains linked to Flemish historical facts which has always been the slow recognition of the rights of the secular group, as, for example burial in cemeteries which were essentially catholic until the 19th century. Consequently, it is a question of explaining to the decision makers that the request for a separate burial ground is not a question of apartheid but a question of religious sensitivity and equality<sup>42</sup>.

### **3. Analyses and recommendations**

In Ghent, as in several other towns of Europe, the Muslims were and still are victims of various forms of discrimination. There are various factors involved here, including the functioning of public institutions.

One notes thus, amongst the administrative staff in charge, there is a certain tendency to deal with the files concerning religious matters in a strictly technocratic way: the agent will organize the ritual of sacrifice from a technical point of view and according to the law, but there is no sacredness involved here, which shocks the Muslim communities since they attach a very great importance to this rite. The personal convictions of the political actors also seem to carry great weight in the resolution of problems relating to the management of the prayer gatherings. This observation is particularly important in the Flemish political context which is aware of the fact that an extremist party (Vlaams Blok/Belang) is beginning to gain more and more importance in public life. The Blok already condemned for racist remarks, is popularising an openly

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<sup>42</sup> This difference in viewpoints came up once again during a meeting with the woman official from the registry office in charge of civil status and the representatives of the CIE on 8 November 29004. The woman official stated her position at the outset: the organisation of a Muslim burial plot was, in her eyes, discrimination towards the other citizens and a contravention of the law on the separation of Church and State. The request to be buried facing in the direction of Mecca and the rituals associated with the inhumation (ablutions, transport of the defunct...) did not pose a problem.

islamophobic attitude<sup>43</sup>. On the basis of the Muslim burial grounds and despite the existence of permissive legislation in this regard, there is resistance at the local level: the concept of “burial grounds with particular characteristics” is confused with the idea of segregation.

Other factors responsible for these blockages are related to the way the Muslim associations operate. If the changes hoped for take a great deal of time to be realised, the low level of involvement and participation of the Muslim associations in “civic” activities is one of the reasons for this established fact. These groupings have difficulties to understand the laws and the regulations that govern Belgian public institutions. Moreover they find it difficult to accept the fact that rules on land planning and safety are more important than the rites and the sacredness of rituals in everyday life.

These reports must be analyzed bearing in mind the slow but visible changes that are occurring within the local leadership of Muslim communities. Thus, the traditional leaders, who are rather old men, who have a certain charisma and prestige within their group, are currently yielding their Community functions to a younger generation, educated and socialized in Belgium, who better understand the risks of local, regional or national policies. Another important process for the effectiveness of an intercommunity dialogue is the setting up of federations at the local and supra local levels: this structure makes for a better channelling of requests from Muslim communities taking into account the regulatory framework and political opportunities.

Even if a great deal still remains to be done in Ghent, particularly with regard to the question on cemeteries so that Muslim religious rights will be fully recognised as they should be, the following table shows us that a great deal of progress has been realised to date: the work done by organizations like the FOGI, the VOEM or the CIE will certainly have borne fruit. The Muslim representatives are better acquainted with the workings of the city institutions, those in the Flemish Region and even those at the federal level. They have found interlocutors and sometimes even partners in these places.

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<sup>43</sup> This extremist party claims to have measured the cost per inhabitant in Ghent for slaughter of animals during the feast of the sacrifice...

<b>Situation before 1995</b>	<b>Situation 1995 - 2002</b>	<b>Situation after 2002</b>
Muslim representation by co-option only Specific dialogues only Lack of interest for the minorities The un-organized Muslim Community	Coaching of Muslim associations by various organizations Coaching of the local decision makers Appearance of a new willingness among decision makers Introduction of a permanent intercultural dialogue Political socialization of the Muslim communities	Confirmation of new political dynamics towards the minorities Reduction in the need for mediation by third party organizations Creation of the "Forum of Ghent mosques" Muslim representation to the more democratic and permanent city bodies

The experiment has allowed us to note the need for the Municipality to mobilise all the groups of inhabitants, through specific and local networks, as in the case of the Muslim group. The presence of elected officials and persons in charge of public services in the districts or areas where Muslims reside also seems to contribute to achieving better relations with this population. There is also the need for the Muslims to organise themselves and to look beyond their internal divisions, in order to be able to more effectively negotiate with the authorities. Within this framework, the role of mobilization and the example of the Community leaders and Imams must be developed in order to justify a greater involvement in civic actions in general, and as citizens of the European Union, involved in the management of the public actions, in dialogue with the inhabitants of all philosophies and religions.