

## Conclusions

### “Faiths and Social cohesion”: political recommendations and “good practices”

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#### Abstract

The “Faiths and Social cohesion” network research has made it possible to question both the idea of “social cohesion” and that of “good practices” that, together, are supposed to produce this harmonious communal life - with reference here to philosophical and religious diversities observed on the local and municipal field.

**Keywords:** Social cohesion, good practices, Muslim faith, European Union, political actions.

The title of this initiative establishes a link between cults – singularly the Muslim cult – and Western societies’ social cohesion. This implies that recognizing these cults gives them value, sets them in their right place in the jigsaw of the institutions that form a Community – and singularly the European Union, melting pot of migrant populations – and helps social cohesion for the integration of that very Union. By contrast, the title also refers to the idea that exclusion or discrimination based on cultural and therefore religious criteria against parts of a population harms “harmonious

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Migration Letters, Volume: 2, No: 3, pp. 408 – 420. December 2005

(ISSN: print: 1741-8984 & online: 1741-8992)

communal life” because of institutional violence and of the frustrations that it creates.

The “Faiths and Social cohesion” network research has made it possible to question both the idea of « social cohesion » and that of « good practices » that, together, are supposed to produce this harmonious communal life – with reference here to philosophical and religious diversities observed on the local and municipal field.

The interest for a reflection in terms of social cohesion coincides with the assertion of social and cultural diversity in Western societies in favour of sociological and geopolitical facts that have mostly to do with industrialisation followed by cultural and economic globalization such as the volume of migration during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This interest shows that the members of a society need to integrate around common values: it is important to maintain evolutionary and fragile balances between the rights and the duties of everyone, between justice and social peace etc. These social relations develop through negotiation and through confrontation between a dominant culture that either integrates or doesn't integrate the set of other cultural frameworks and backgrounds on the basis of its own criteria.

When thinking about the place of the Muslim difference in European municipalities, one has to explicitly take into account both these perceptions which are opposed and yet complementary of life in society. If managing religious diversities is an issue that needs to be addressed particularly in today's society, it also shows the development of the situations of populations that have come from immigrants between integration and discrimination. One cannot tackle the issue of ethno-religious discrimination without raising the idea of “harmonious communal life”. This idea leads to the idea of social relations based on dominance and hierarchy as the basic analysis grid.

The analyses that were made by the « Faiths and Social cohesion » network have led us to draw conclusions presented in this book. They have also led us to make political and practical recommendations and we are going to state these in the conclusions of our work.

## 2. “Social cohesion” and “good practices”

On the whole, the project has made it possible to reconstruct the notion of social cohesion as a *framework of social participation that best guarantees the disappearance or the limitation of discrimination and exclusion suffered by the minority groups using cooperation and expression of solidarity between various social and cultural categories and layers*. Let's note that this definition categorically and systematically refuses the easy and regrettably too common trend that consists in constructing social cohesion of some people at the detriment of others.

« Good practices » are initiatives of a certain scope and that have a certain length of time. They are validated by the assessment methods and by inter-sites comparison processes. In our case, *these practises are deemed “good” because they help elaborate social participation democratic contexts and correction in discrimination in favour of religious minorities*. They can be transferred to other places in return for adaptations.

Good practices must always include significant social changes based on the principle of treatment equality and of acquired advantages. The experiences that were made during the “Cult and social cohesion” action have shown that practices and results are strictly tied to circumstances: success depends on its evolution conditions, including the characteristics of its social and geographical situation and the characteristics of its main participants whether they are people or institutions who are their trustees or their partners, that is to say the stakes which mobilize these participants, the skills that they use, the structures that support them, etc. Hence, the transferability of observed good practises in a particular place to other places is a difficult question: transfer never happens by itself.

By contrast, « pilot projects » and « new practices » experiments, along with initiatives taken by individual participants or by groups of social participants in touch with observed or experienced troubles, productive dialogues that consolidate democracy, etc. are all things that make actions more conscious and more awareness rising, with a real hope to change mentalities.

However, the sustainable aspect of these emergent initiatives depends only on their being taken over by the legislations and structural frameworks that alone can validate them. *A good practice of change in terms of a positive action and responsabilisation of cultural diversities must come from an institutional and structural strategy and*

*must come from a change in conceptual backgrounds and attitudes in people.*

### **3. Political and practical recommendations**

Political orientations and ideas of concrete actions derived from the « Cult and Social Cohesion » action are still to be further studied in future actions, yet they make it possible to address the decision makers in distinctive ways whether they be local, regional, federal or European and to address other social participants among whom Muslim religious leaders.

If decision makers or people with responsibility in administrations of all kinds play a major part in constructing social participation beyond differences in particular religious differences, the recommendations also concern Muslim associations themselves. Muslim community associations and religious leaders in Europe are the basis of a historical evolution that the “Muslim culture” is now becoming more stable, more assured, more pacific, and more truly mixed to the links in chains of western society.

Recommendations are also addressed to researchers and professional participants on the field, cultural and social participants, and education participants who try to get positive effects by means of intercommunity contacts established on the field. Recommendations for the media are still in the pipeline.

#### **3.1. Muslim citizens and participants**

All the observers that were made in the past few years on the “Faiths and Social cohesion” project sites say that it is advisable for Muslim citizens of Europe to *form federations beyond their internal differences* around platforms. The idea is also to *open mentalities and to seize all opportunities of social participation that exist at local level* in the European society: neighbourhood associations, housing associations. Muslim citizens should make themselves known and mark their presence with a seal of lawfulness, of their difference and of their ability to live together with their non-Muslim neighbours.

Inter-religious and inter-community convergences are very useful and must integrate local delegates of the Muslim cults but most often they should be preceded by inter-knowledge and dialog initiatives (social link) about what is shared concretely and daily by various populations in their common areas.

The idea is for Muslims to *be present at all levels of political life in order to* find collective and pragmatic responses to the problems that are often important to Muslim citizens and that are most often shared by other populations: followers of other minority discriminated cults, people socially excluded in under-privileged neighbourhoods, etc. One can learn from the experiences that were carried out among others in Belgium and in France during the “Faiths and Social cohesion” project that the exercise of political citizenship and the quality of the voters are major tools in recognizing Islam both at local and supra-local levels. The cooperation of Muslim associations or of associations created by Muslims with political and administrative decision makers in their area of residence is a *sine qua non* condition to the recognition and to the public expression of Islam as a normal thing in areas such as youth leadership, social aid, etc. If a political indifference harms the will of Muslim populations to play a part in these areas, If political indifference hinders the willingness of the Muslims to play a role in these areas along with other churches and religious groups one should also regret the difficulty experienced by opinion leaders of various Muslim groups in Europe to envisage a pragmatic form of cooperation with administrations and other institutions that depend on political administrations.

### **3.2. The local participants and decision makers**

In addition, the search and the actions that we have been carrying out for the past three years in seven European cities and a similar observation process that is carried out in Montreal, Quebec, have shown that places of dialogue dedicated to local management of religious and philosophical diversity are often strikingly absent. Therefore, we think that it is urgent for municipalities to *set up permanent institutions to allow the people in their constituencies with different beliefs and different philosophies to “rub against one another”* and to allow the development of new cohesions. These flexible structures can take the form of municipal councils, gathering all cults and philosophies; they can also be basis for popular actions and for festivals, and for events that aim at valuing and enhancing everybody at increasing everyone’s trust beyond differences. These are groups with projects or places where political proposals can be made and where politicians, decision makers, leaders and participants can meet and produce a common reflection: the fight against discrimination can then begin.

### 3.3. Professional social workers

Some recommendations are addressed to social workers on the field and have to do with social, educational and cultural actions and with the fight against discrimination. It is interesting that in this group there are teachers whose role is particularly important as far as they are in touch with tomorrow’s adults and beyond today’s parents. This has been shown by the experiences of the project around Liège and in Rome. The idea of these teachers is to *train, inform and accompany families, Muslim communities associations, and municipality decision makers* because it is not easy for any of these participants to understand and to interact with people’s difference especially in political contexts where the interests can be totally divergent. The idea is therefore to develop<sup>88</sup> a project of mediation or of triangulation.

Here, from now on, it will be necessary to request more precision in the action and more precision in the objectives of change in order to better balance and better target initiatives and expectations and in order to better assess:

- According to whether one wishes to develop one or several strategies proposed in the integrated fight model against all forms of discrimination;
- According to the various dimensions identifying discrimination (individual and /or institutional);
- According to the various levels of aggression (people or organisations, public institutions) and to the expected changes for each of these levels;
- According to the targeted audiences: associations’ leaders or mosques’ leaders, political and administrative decision makers, relay participants, etc.

Each strategy should, moreover, be more proactive, better planned, in order to avoid too much « improvisation » in reaction to events. It is difficult to plan crisis resolution in detail but it is advised to better structure all coaching and training abilities. Within the framework of the “Faiths and Social cohesion” project the progress of the files and the improvement of the crisis situations have shown the good practices below:

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<sup>88</sup> Social workers and teachers have, in turn, the right to benefit from coaching and training in order to fulfil their tasks as mediators and facilitators.

- Time needs to be spent to identify participants and to improve their feeling of trust.
- The expertise of researchers and participants, of their institutions, their direct implication on the field and finally the European dimension of the project have been of the utmost importance to strengthen their trust.
- A good knowledge of anti-discrimination legislation, of the cult management related legislation, and of the intercultural negotiation and mediation skills is necessary to foster the progress of files.
- The organisation of visible public events speeds up crisis management. The relation to the media however must be looked at cautiously: the press must also be accompanied in their approach of the religious discrimination question.

Of course, the method of this psychosocial accompaniment and of this social and cultural mediation remains to be determined in its details and this should be done in the framework of another project. However, a number of examples of possible initiatives can be presented usefully.

Writing brief technical documents to be read by local decision makers or by the press in dealing with positive management of various aspects of the Muslim diversity or more generally the religious diversity in secularized European municipalities is an initiative that meets the defined expectations and recommendations. Similarly, we recommend setting up a “summer university” with the aim to teach local decision makers the know-how that has been produced by experiences of fight against religious discrimination and the fundamental rights and the public responsibilities in the legal field in relation to the liberty of cult. This pragmatic information method can also be accompanied by a system of study trips in “pilot” sites in the field of positive management of religious diversity for “pairs” of local decision makers/local religious leaders. This would allow them to see by themselves what progress has been made in the field of recognition and citizen participation of (immigrant) Muslims and it would enable them to develop team building skills.

### **3.4. Researchers in social sciences**

Practice has shown that the religious discrimination question has been very little studied. Therefore, it is still necessary to launch

*surveys, conferences and publications on a wide scale.* The idea of religious discrimination is still faced with a lot of resistance. The fight against this phenomenon is recent and it is often involved in the whirl of the geopolitical current affairs; this is quite remote from the history of the establishment of immigrant Muslim communities in European areas. Sometimes it is necessary to accept that processes are slow and to let time do its work but it will also be necessary to better understand the settling and evolution processes of these communities as well as the functioning of municipalities towards them in order to identify blockings and everybody's claims in order to identify good practices for living together and public management methods that take account of cultural diversity.

It would seem useful to extend the observations that are laid out in this project to other religions and spiritualities and to the general situation of cultural associations set up by migrants in the European countries because it would help this type of study projects to become more widespread. As a complement to this extension it would also be useful to study specifically the situation across all the European countries of one single ethno-national and religious community because it would be possible to compare local contexts. This would be an alternative method that would enlighten our understanding of the phenomenon that we are studying. In this case populations coming from Turkey, for example, seem rather relevant as Turkey is currently trying to become a member of the European Union. Turkey is secular but Muslim. In the same vein, there is another field that has not yet been sufficiently investigated and that is for example that of sub-Saharan African populations: the links between immigrants and religious beliefs and practices and the social and economical integration in the host country and their contribution to the development of their area of origin. With time, this study could lead to the development of completely new social and educational techniques that would consist in giving more value to "the civil and intercultural skills" of the inserted immigrants who have managed to be somehow recognised beyond their differences in European countries. These skills are the defence of the fundamental rights for everyone, political pluralism, inter-culturality, inter-religiousness, etc. They are integral parts of democracy and their transfer into most of the migrant countries of origin is a major stake for democracy.

By contrast, one of the scientific and social stakes that remains to be developed is without doubt *to approach the notion of Islam pho-*

*bia in its links with other ostracisms and particularly the other phenomena of cultural, religious and ethnic stigmatization.* The determinism of history in European societies in their relations to cultural differences needs to be measured in order to move away from the complacent aspect of those historical reflexes. So far, our work has shown effectively how complex the discrimination situations are as they mix individual community and institutional situations. It would seem legitimate for us to speak of systematic discrimination and of alliance quite often with the economic exclusion of the mostly immigrant working class population, at least originally. It is time to disentangle the knots and to make room for a two-sided approach<sup>89</sup> : focussing on the cultural aspects while having a general action on the equality of rights taking account of diversities. (Equality of rights is overall mainstream).

### **3.5. European Union authorities**

Systemic discrimination: aren't we talking here of a European competence since the Union has equipped itself with a legal arsenal to help develop fundamental rights? *Allowing the international development of the research projects and interventions* surely is the job of the European Union in partnership with the member States and the regions of Europe. These projects have a necessary comparative and international dimension. They are also necessary in order to *define a common legal and pragmatic base in the fight against religious discrimination.* The European level, the political lever farthest from local interests, might be the best placed to mobilize our intelligence

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<sup>89</sup> This dual approach has proved to be most efficient in the fight against gender discrimination. The "Faiths and Social cohesion" project also seems to be an example of this efficiency in the fight against religious discrimination: in Cheratte or in Rome, for example, the research action focused on the mainstreaming aspects of equality; religious discrimination was not treated as the openly declared main theme and no tangible change could be identified in this field during the project. Moreover, one could fear that, faced with many types of reluctance, the religious dimension could be smothered in the mass of other problem areas. Conversely, when cultural aspects were treated directly (Ghent and Roubaix and Granada) equality mainstreaming was, of course, the necessary background, but the results linked to the practice of a cult are easier to identify and make more tangible. Hence, the need to be more audacious in expressing the objective of the fight, as it could be better accepted if translated in terms of 'management of religious diversity' rather than 'fight against a particular type of discrimination'.

when it comes to grasp the positions towards difference serenely and dispassionately, beyond old-fashioned imperialist mentalities quite often inherited from the past.

In this complex background, it is necessary to have an excellent knowledge and wide range spreading of anti-discrimination legislation and of cult management legislation. However, there being a legislation in the matter is far from sufficient in combating inequalities. According to Habermas, it is not anti-discrimination laws that need to be considered but their value when they are used and in particular their intensity of implementation and their concrete ability to be implemented. The transfer to our learned practical skills sector in the fight against other forms of exclusion such as gender-related exclusion can be useful. Similarly, the transfer of learned knowledge in the fight against other forms of religious discrimination such as the fight against anti-Semitism can bring an interesting insight in the understanding of what needs to be done in the fight against Islam phobia and in particular : *all in all, the idea is to start thinking of Islam as an intrinsic European fact.*

It could be said that « *Islam enters Europe* » but it would be just as appropriate to say that "*Islam is becoming more European*". This can be observed in the fact that some minorities within the Muslim minority start to express themselves. There are now feminine associations or homosexual Muslim associations. This can also be observed in the developing and in the cooperation between majority Muslim communities (Sunnite Turks associations) with minority Muslim communities (Alevia Turkish community). European Islam expresses itself in a wide range of diversities and internal dissension. Now, in addition, it also expresses itself in European languages in the mouth of young European believers originating in the immigration population or in that of native Europeans converted to Islam. Finally, in the first stage, this local expression is increasingly structuring itself into federations and confederations of Muslims of Europe; it becomes more professional and more systematic in the various social categories. This can be seen in Muslim engineers' associations, Muslim investors' associations, Muslim students' associations, etc.

Muslim identity, in the European space, creates associations more easily than in its spaces of origin. These associations are made with other parts of secular identities and the challenge is for it to accept to look at its internal diversities in a democratic way and to look at the spatial, temporal and cultural relativity of the

beliefs and of the religious practices. Paradoxically, Europe allows Islam to quietly unfold the infinite richness of its internal diversity and Europe is thereby forced into (re)considering the place that it in turn makes for Muslim diversity and, beyond this, for the public statement of a religious belief. This could be the very lesson to learn from this cultural convergence project: *transform one another by being in contact with one another.*

Finally, this aspect brings us to the last major consideration derived from the very centre of our debates of society. For the European Union which is undoubtedly enlarging towards the Eastern world, the challenge is to reopen the dialog on the links between religion and secularity: the aim is to advance towards a new identity and a new alliance, a new social and philosophical contract that makes clear distinctions between the points below:

- Secularity is a form of governance of society and it isn't a way of life which should be imposed on any person living in that society;
- Concrete secularity can only exert itself in a society where some groups like those coming from the immigration are often less secularized than other groups or follow other paths of secularization;
- Muslim religious organisations or other religious organisations also organize secular activities that need to be appreciated and possibly encouraged;
- Finally, secularity does not forbid dynamic and visible pluralism; it does not forbid diversity through which each particular group has an equal value and expression of its diversity.

### **3.6. National or regional political authorities**

It is a clever idea to think that (trans)forming a human being is something that guarantees long life to anti-discrimination actions, it would be a mistake to think that this would make it possible to save having to invest in institutions. Training people is a necessary condition but it is not enough to make sure that cultural and religious diversities are managed positively. This is why the ongoing actions should be pursued with possible training sessions and by strengthening the institutional aspect thanks, for example, to creating dialogue mechanisms or thanks to an explicit political commitment expressed by the public authorities in a planned anti-

discrimination action program or a pro-diversity plan which would define among other things the success indicators for a religious diversity management at local level.

There is still much to do at various levels of administration such as the federal level (Belgium) or the regional level (Spain). The role of these agencies would be to support local actions concretely at the level of the municipalities voluntarily taking part in a *plan of integrated fight against all forms of discrimination*. These political programs will also have to translate into legal mechanisms and into administrative and regulatory dispositions in order to set an example at more local levels.

The objective of this fight is not always to make room for “linear” treatment equality in as far as the needs and approaches may differ. It is possible to compare the established “Christian” majority with an immigrant Muslim minority that constitutes a mostly poor population? Everyone acts according to their needs ... for an equality of the levels of recognition... And the regional, national or federal levels would be the right ones to launch a high quality *inter-religious and inter-philosophical dialogue*. We are living times of unbridled extremism. Isn't it therefore particularly necessary to remind people that the first role of any religious teaching and of any humanist philosophy is to transmit a message of relationship, peace, and love beyond our differences?

Concrete proposals and initiatives have already been made and are in line with recommendations in the field of creating “agency-type structures” both in local areas and at European level and whose task will be to define discrimination and religious violence indicators against religions and beliefs. We need places where discrimination is monitored, indeed, but we also need places where extremism is monitored; otherwise how might it be possible to move towards such a social cohesion? These structures must gather specialists and delegates from public authorities, elected members or religious delegates, philosophical and main cult delegates. The advantage of this move will be to establish a mutual citizen monitoring system without giving the bad impression that “some people are being monitored by others”. This will make it possible for the democratic dialogue to exist and to become better known in the field of the relations between religions and states and between religions and philosophies.

### **3.7. The media**

The authorities and the participants, when trying to ease and relax the general climate, really need the help of the media. Their duty is to support the social and political agenda, *to enhance initiatives, particularly local ones, and to illustrate the actions of fight against discrimination or in favour of diversity in order to make the example and the inspiration known ... in other places.*