



## OSCE High-Level Conference on Tolerance and Non-Discrimination

### Civil Society Roundtable, “Promoting Mutual Respect and Understanding”

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“When I was a boy in Tibet, I felt that my own Buddhist religion must be the best — and that other faiths were somehow inferior. Now I see how naïve I was, and how dangerous the extremes of religious intolerance can be today.”

This quote from a recent article by the Dalai Lama<sup>1</sup> shows at once the difficulties and the importance of promoting mutual respect and understanding. And while I cannot be nearly as captivating, nor as concise, as the Dalai Lama, please allow me, in this presentation to outline some of these obstacles as well as the rewards.

#### **Introduction**

I will largely base my comments on the work of the civil society organisation I represent here, CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, so I will very briefly introduce the organisation and my role in it.

CEJI is a Jewish anti-racism organisation. We provide diversity education against discrimination in all its forms, working with networks of partner organisations in 14 European OSCE Participating States. We manage these networks, which provide trainings in schools, youth organisations and community centers, and for adult educators as well as public authorities.

CEJI also the founded the European Platform for Jewish-Muslim Co-operation, which brings together Jewish and Muslim dialogue practitioners from a number of OSCE Participating States.

Based on these activities, I am then responsible for translating our experiences on the ground to the policy level. We advocate on matters of education, equal opportunities, and combating discrimination.

This is the way in which CEJI aims to promote respect and tolerance. By teaching people about identity, about themselves but also about others, and by making people understand what prejudice is and how you can combat falling into the traps of judging people without knowing them, or knowing anything about them other than preconceived notions.

<sup>1</sup> Tenzin Gyatso, *Many Faiths, One Truth*, in: *New York Times*, 24 May 2010



### Defining a Group

The first question in defining the “Other” is one raised by the Dalai Lama in the quote I just shared: A group is by definition both inclusive and exclusive. An ornithological society, for instance, includes bird lovers and strengthens them in their identity and interest. And in doing so it excludes those not interested in watching birds, and those who do not own a pair of binoculars.

Similarly, a nation, a religion, a community, and any group, is defined by certain boundaries – those who are in, and those who are not.

This is particularly true with regards to religious groups and communities. To quote Herman van Praag, a psychologist who has written about tolerance and hatred: “A Christian cannot but believe that a Jew does not stand in the full, cleansing light of Christ. The Jew stands in his shadow. A Christian must believe that, or he ceases to be a Christian. A Jew who would share that opinion, ceases to be a Jew. This principled distance between Jews and Christians is not bridgeable, regardless of the amount of respect they may have for each other’s viewpoints.”<sup>2</sup>

This does not mean, however, that a group must define itself as better than another. Especially as we are in the midst of the World Championship of Football, it is important to point out that the Dutch, for example, are not a better nation than the Danish or the Japanese (or the Cameroonians).

The same holds true for religions. Of course, the fact that I refuse to stand, in the “light of Christ”, makes me a bad Christian. I accept that, and as a Jew, I am even proud of that. But that does not make me a bad person. As a Jew, I can respect the beliefs of others, even respectfully question them as I question my own in my personal journey. And others can return the favor: Ask me what it means to be a Jew, and why I won’t accept what is true to other faiths. The simple answer, of course, is that in defining myself as a Jew and not as a Christian, Muslim or Hindu, I am true to myself.

For that to be possible, for me to be able to positively and clearly identify myself, I must understand myself, and by understanding the boundaries of my own identity, I learn about those of others. And vice versa. In learning about others, I also come to better understand myself. Therefore, the process of positive identity building is woven into the process of understanding others.

### Lack of Knowledge, Understanding of the Other

The next obstacle to mutual respect and understanding, is a lack of knowledge, a lack of understanding, of the “Other”. Dialogue and education serve, in CEJI’s experience, to provide people with a healthy and full sense of identity. Of their own identities, and then also of other people’s identities.

<sup>2</sup> H.M. van Praag, *Joden-haat en Zion’s-haat; Een drama in vijf bedrijven* (Aspekt – CIDI-Informatiereeks: Soesterberg, 2009), pp. 163-164



This is what CEJI's diversity and anti-discrimination training programmes do: because once you realise that within yourself you have multiple identities, you can start looking at the things you have in common with the other. Once the similarities are clear, the differences matter a lot less! Trite, but true nonetheless.

This is where the Dalai Lama's example comes in: As we said, every group is defined by what it stands for and by what it does not stand for. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, are defined by what they believe as well as by what they don't believe. Similarly: Kazakhs, British, Dutch, Canadians are defined by the borders around their countries. Yet, to continue on that strand: they are not necessarily mutually exclusive identities, nor are they unable to work together, for instance at the OSCE. But if co-operation across groups is to work well, there is a requirement of a minimum of respect, of tolerance for other ideas, viewpoints and for those who hold them.

How does our educational work counter such lack of understanding of the "Other"? Allow me to share an example, an anecdote reported by one of our trainers. I have used it before, even during OSCE-meetings, but it gives me goose bumps every time I tell it. So please bear with me if you have heard this story before:

A Muslim teenager from Brussels was participating in A World of Difference™ diversity training, in an activity where he was told to imagine living like a Jew for the rest of the day. He borrowed a kippa [**point to kippa!**], and went to play football with his friends. They laughed at him, then got angry: "Why are you being a Jew?" Then, they started abusing him, calling him all kinds of anti-Semitic slurs.

These were his friends, people he knew, people who knew him, people he played football with every day after school. When he came back to school and was asked what it means to live as a Jew, he said he finally understood.

Understanding is that. It is about learning about someone else's identity, about understanding what it is like to be them.

One must know the "Other" in order to understand their struggles, their problems, and also to see the value they add to the multi-coloured tapestry of society. To use a touchy example: how many people who speak out about the banning of facial veils – either in favour or against – have actually spoken to (dialogued with!) a woman wearing a burqa? It is easy to make a decision about an "Other" we don't know, to demonise them. Once you see the person behind the symbol, it is a lot more difficult to stigmatise that symbol. That is one of the important aspects of dialogue, and one of the things that CEJI's educational work tries to achieve: to get people to understand the viewpoint of the "Other", and thereby, to see the other as a full human being, someone who holds opinions and thoughts. Agreement is not a prerequisite for such dialogue, but what is required, is the acceptance of the equal and universal rights of all, as well as a democratic and open-minded approach.

### **Groupthink**

The third obstacle I want to touch on is related, but a little more nuanced: the idea that all Jews, Muslims, French people, gays, Roma etc. behave in a certain manner or believe certain things. The underlying assumptions are those that may sometimes be



founded in truth (Jews don't eat pork. The Dutch play excellent football.), but they fail to acknowledge that people think for themselves, act on their own behalf, and crucially: relate to their own identities in their own particular manner.

In the language of Monty Python: "We are all individuals!". Every person chooses how they live their own lives, with their own identities; what these identities mean to them, and how they show them to others or not.

While learning about, and showing respect for, people's customs and practices is important, it is equally important to ensure that the fine line between cultural understanding and preconceived notions is not crossed. Not all Jews and Muslims refrain from eating pork. Not all Jews are wealthy either. Knowledge is imperative, but a little bit of knowledge can be dangerous. Within defined groups, within communities, there is a wide spectrum of identities, of practices, and of opinions. Not all Christians are the same. Not all Roma are the same. Not all gay men are the same.

This is why it is, in CEJI's opinion, so important to teach about individual identities, and not to lump together different people as if they all think, act and behave in the same way. So even in teaching tolerance and respect, we have to be careful not to rely on stereotypes alone, but to assume individuality.

Moreover, and this is where we get to a more political terrain, fewer and fewer people, at least in the OSCE area, are affiliated with particular groups that can speak for them. Long gone is the time when the Rabbi, the Priest, the Pastor or the Imam could speak for their congregation and could change their votes and behaviors. People choose their own religious and spiritual paths, within, but often also outside the institutions of Mosque, Synagogue or Church. They do away with what some researchers have aptly named "vicarious leaders"<sup>3</sup>.

CEJI saw this in practice in preparing its Mapping Reports of Jewish-Muslim Dialogue Initiatives a couple of years ago: The vast majority of initiatives we found were started and carried out not by religious leaders, but by regular Muslims and Jews.

Whether this development is positive or not is up for debate. But it is simply today's reality. So rather than bringing together religious leaders for a dialogue conference, as some governments and political organizations sometimes do, I would say that it is more important, or at least more effective, to stimulate and support grassroots activities that promote dialogue and co-operation. CEJI approaches diversity education from an individual standpoint: you teach a person about their identity and how it is made up, and about the multiple and fluid identities of others.

### **Individual Action and Responsibility**

Finally, CEJI uses a methodology that does not stop with the acquisition of knowledge and awareness. The goal of our educational work is to stimulate in the participants a mentality of active citizenship, whereby people carry a sense of

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Bokern et al., *From Dialogue to Peacebuilding? Perspectives for the Engagement of Religious Actors by the EU and the European People's Party* (Centre for European Studies: Brussels, 2009) p. 12



personal responsibility vis-à-vis their environment. Whereby they aim to not only understand bias and discrimination, but counter it by modeling respect and inclusive behavior, and by being active citizens. Changing individual attitudes and behaviours changes relationships, organizations and societies.

A police captain who changes the way he relates to the communities he serves. A teacher who is better able to handle conflicts in her classroom. A manager who develops fact sheets and clearer policies related to the diversity among his staff. These are just a few of the examples which demonstrate how education can impact peoples' behaviors and the environments in which they act.

These examples come from an evaluation of a CEJI program. Some copies of this evaluation are available here, and they can also be found on our website.

The aim must be not to teach theoretical insights, but to inspire action.

### **Conclusion**

So, to recapitulate my four points in brief, they are:

1. A positive personal identity is linked with the capacity for understanding "Others";
2. A good understanding of the "Other", or at least an openness to doing so, is vital to the bridging of gaps and the creation of mutual respect;
3. The focus should be firmly on the individuals that make up our societies, in all their diversity, if we are to come together to create inclusive societies where diversity is truly seen as an added value, as a richness; and finally
4. The individuals that make up society should be empowered to take action themselves – to actively contribute to an inclusive society.

I hope that these points I have set out, can guide us in our discussion towards recommendations for the OSCE Participating States.