



Religious diversity and the challenges

of constructing an inclusive European public space

Intervention by Robin Sclafani, Director of CEJI – A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe, at the RELIGARE Policy Dialogue Meeting: The Challenges of Religious Diversity in EU Law and Policy

June 30, 2011

With appreciation for the distinctions between the different forms of public space provided by Dr. Ferrari, I'd like to raise some of the challenges which we face in each of them or achieving an authentic inclusion of the diversity of religions and beliefs.

1) Assuming that all people can actually go into the common space, despite restrictions on dress code imposed either by their religio-cultural tradition or by the state, then how people are being together in that space is a whole other question that cannot be legislated beyond a prohibition of crime, violence or hate speech. Imagine, for example, the local market. What are their attitudes towards the "other"? What behaviors result from their assumptions towards those who appear to be the same or different for one reason or another? How do these interpretations potentially escalate, or de-escalate, intergroup tensions? How are they communicated around the dinner table between parents and then to their children and youth who will act accordingly with this set of interpretations and biases? These questions raise implications for mechanisms by which a common culture are created – education, media, role models, etc.

2) The distinction of the common space as "pre-political" also brings the question about how we encourage, or not, civic participation. That means being a responsible and engaged participant in community life, as well as being able to enter formally or informally the public discourse which requires pluralistic engagement– this is what Dr. Ferrari defines as the political space.

In particular, if we are concerned about the social isolation or exclusion of women from specific minority religious backgrounds, then are we helping to decrease their isolation by imposing dress code restrictions that might impede their ability to circulate in the common space and also participate in the political space? The challenge for society here in the midst of choosing between restrictions is how to preserve a woman's right to self-determination.

3) One great challenge to the institutional public space, in particular in the context of the absolutely crucial anti-discrimination and equality legislation, is the clear defining of what constitutes an act of discrimination or harassment. Clarity of definitions is useful, for example, for drawing the distinction of religion/belief discrimination in the context of multiple discrimination, or for clarifying when there is a certain blurriness such as with ethnicity (racism) or politics.

It is also necessary for addressing conflicts of rights, either perceived or real, which are strongly evident in the political as well as institutional public spaces, and they are sometimes mis-named as discrimination, phobia or ism, which mobilises support in the political space and is eventually brought for final deliberation in the institutional space.

For example, in the recent 5-year shadow report on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians, many of the examples which are given as expressions of discrimination against Christians are based upon legal actions taken against people who, in the name of Christian beliefs, were accused of incitement to hatred against gays/lesbians or discrimination against gays/lesbians. In fact, as we speak, a parallel programme is taking place here in the Parliament on LGBTI rights, illustrating the dichotomy of these 2 sets of rights.

Last year the Network of European Foundations commissioned a report produced by researchers from the University of Bielefeld in Germany which produced empirical evidence of a direct correlation between religion and prejudice. My first reaction to these results was resistance, because we at CEJI believe strongly in mutual respect, and we work with plenty of religious people of a variety of beliefs who are committed to the principles of non-discrimination, just as there are also plenty of examples of prejudice and discrimination coming from the non-religious.

However, to be honest, we have to agree with this report's conclusion that one of the primary causes of prejudice amongst the religious and non-religious, is the formal and informal education which teaches, either explicitly or implicitly, a moral superiority. Our way is the best way, the true way, therefore others are inferior, sinful or living in a state of ignorance. Why must the existence of another lifestyle or belief system be put in opposition to one's own? At which point does the existence of one become a threat to the existence of another? How can we decrease the perception, if not the reality, of threat?

We must find ways to reduce conflicts of rights and conflicts of identity, through legislative clarity, as well as through education and other means of individual and cultural influence. Conflict only exists when there is some level of interaction or interdependence. Plurality is a fact – how we deal with it is the choice. Perhaps recognizing our mutual interdependence in a shared society is a good point of departure for resolving such conflicts.

Whereby the distinction of the 3 forms of public spaces might in some ways be helpful to a discussion of limits and freedoms, we must not forget the interaction and mutual influence between these 3 spaces.

Relationships and experiences built within the common space shape personal attitudes, influencing the public discourse and institutional trends, and vice versa.

At CEJI, we do not have all the answers to these dilemmas, but we have some key principles that guide us through the maze of negotiating needs and values in religious diversity,

expressed through our guiding vision: An inclusive and democratic Europe in which people enjoy their full potential with all their diversity.

In this vision, democratic processes of participation and pluralistic engagement at every level – from schools through transnational governance – are essential and must take place within the framework of fundamental human rights.

CEJI's concrete response to the challenges of diversity is to provide training and facilitation that can contribute to social conflict transformation.

One example is the award winning Religious Diversity and Anti-Discrimination Training Programme, now offered under the name of "Belieforama: A Panoramic Approach to Issues of Religion and Belief", which changes attitudes and inspires individual, organization and community actions that support inclusive societies.

This program was created in order to provide a space where believers and non-believers across, between and around a variety of traditions, including the non-Abrahamic which are often forgotten in debates, can engage the issues of living together.

As a European partnership within the framework of the Grundtvig programme, we are tackling some of the toughest issues faced for religious diversity, such as the "Reconciliation of Religion, Gender and Sexual Orientation". How can we have a more productive discourse and constructive strategies for bringing these identity aspects out of conflict?

For the sake of social cohesion in Europe and abroad, we must be able to engage across these differences, with respect for each others' humanity, to find ways of sharing the public space.

I applaud the work of Religare towards this end, and thank you very much for asking CEJI to weigh in on these key questions.