



A Jewish Educational Approach to Religious Pluralism

By Robin Sclafani, Director of CEJI-A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe

As published in "Religious Literacy, Law and History: Perspectives on European Pluralist Societies", edited by Alberto Melloni, Francesca Cadeddu. Routledge, 2018.

Religious pluralism is a global reality, and given the effect of worldwide communications on people's lived experience, it is also a local reality regardless of the actual demographics in any one given area. How we approach the question of religion and belief literacy is inextricably linked with how we approach the opportunities and risks associated with religious pluralism¹. Taking the definition of Diane Moore which has been adopted by the American Academy of Religion, "religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses."²

This definition implies that knowledge about different religions is not enough to consider oneself "literate", although certainly such knowledge is a useful starting point. Concerns about religious illiteracy in Europe are arising now in the 21st century, not because of a simple curiosity about different religious traditions, but because of real concerns about a variety of issues which are arising in the context of a Europe which is composed of a plurality of religious and non-religious beliefs, values and practices. It is not the simple fact that religious Jews read the Torah, Muslims the Quran and Christians the New Testament which is causing such concerns. Rather, concerns arise in the way different people interpret the religious dimension when considering modern social issues such as asylum and integration policies, law enforcement practices, school lunch menus, financing

¹ Religious pluralism is understood in this article to imply a diversity of religions and beliefs, which can also be called convictional pluralism, including atheists, agnostics, humanists, free-thinkers as well as those who belong to organised and unorganised religions as part of the pluralistic reality which must be understood in the modern-day European context.

² Moore, Diane L (2016) "Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach" in World History Connected: Vol.4, No. 1. Available at: <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/4.1/moore.html>



of religious institutions, the wearing of religious dress and symbols, the ways in which religion is taught in public schools, civil rights for LGBTQI people³, etc.

Religious literacy is needed to discern and analyze, from different perspectives, the variety of issues which Europe currently faces in order to find practical solutions that are consistent with the core democratic principle of fundamental rights. Religion is a protected ground in a human rights framework, wherein people have the freedom to practice or not practice.⁴ Europe today, in some ways, seems to be struggling with a perceived conflict between “freedom of religion” and “freedom from religion”. And herein lies the problem with religious illiteracy: when the search for practical strategies to any given issue is reduced to a Manicheistic, polarized or dualistic paradigm, the political discourse is more likely to resort to scapegoating the “other”, the social fabric is weakened by an “us vs. them” mentality, and thus the soil is ripe for the propagation of extremisms which can more easily lead to violence.

This conflict spiral is well-illustrated in the reactions and debates in Europe which have emerged in the course of the “refugee crisis” which peaked in August 2015. The political and public discourse revolving around the fact that many of the refugees were Muslim was most certainly inflamed by the multiple terrorist attacks which had recently taken place in Europe. The Burkini ban in some French coastal towns, the resistance to serving vegetarian or Halal options in school lunches or the banning of religious slaughter or circumcision are all examples of how conflicts can escalate with a low capacity to understand, discern and analyze the effect of such “us vs. them” discourse on the European social fabric, which includes a very diverse population of those who identify themselves as Muslim.

In the face of emerging social issues, such as the arrival of refugees from war-torn regions, the risk of religious illiteracy is that people fall back onto limited amounts of knowledge, oversimplified generalizations or prejudices which can corrupt the process of finding practical solutions to very real and pressing issues. In contrast, religious literacy can provide an opportunity to consider possible causes and effects from multiple perspectives, thus helping to de-escalate conflicts and satisfy our higher principle of guaranteeing the fundamental rights of all people.

³ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex. For more information see www.ilga-europe.org.

⁴ Freedom of religion or belief is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 18) and reaffirmed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (article 18) signed by over 160 States. In addition to freedom of religion, this right includes the right to adopt, change or abandon a religion or belief, or to profess no religion or belief.



What can we learn from the Jewish experience?

Jewish communities have come to terms with the reality of religious pluralism long before there were airplanes and internet, long before the existence of the nation-state, long before many of today's modern religions even existed such as Sikhism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism. The story of the Jews dates as far back as three millennia with the emergence of the ancient Hebrews as a distinct human entity. The Jewish holiday of Passover recalls the Jews' own status as "other" in the land of Egypt and the persecution they endured. Jewish communities should understand what it means to be a minority, to be a refugee, to be blamed for illness or economic depression, to be hunted as heretics or used for racial experimentation. Jews also know what it means to be "integrated", to rebuild one's community, to be resilient in the face of catastrophe.

"In their principled refusal to relinquish their own religio-ethnic identity, the Jews serve as a testimony to the intrinsic merit of religious pluralism."⁵

The mission of *CEJI-A Jewish Contribution to an Inclusive Europe*⁶ is rooted in the Jewish experience of living pluralism. CEJI's vision is "an inclusive and democratic Europe in which people enjoy their full potential with all their diversity." This vision recognizes that Europe's diversity is not a matter of religious or ethnic origin alone, but rather each person's identity is unique in the way different social and personal dimensions interact to form a cohesive whole. Our daily experience and the ways in which we interpret the world around us are influenced simultaneously by one's religious, cultural and national identifications as well as one's gender, sexual orientation, abilities and disabilities, social and economic class, education, languages spoken, family history and status, physical appearance and one's personal talents, preferences, beliefs, spirituality, relationships, etc.

While Judaism is a religion, being Jewish does not automatically imply that one is actually religious. Being Jewish is much more than belonging to a religious group; it is an identity that is shaped by numerous historical and cultural influences as well as the way one interprets a collective experience through a personal lens shaped also by nationality, religiosity, gender, socio-economic class, etc. Therefore, to understand what it means to be Jewish requires more than knowledge about the religious dimension of Judaism.

Of course it is useful to have some basic religious knowledge to create an environment that is inclusive for Jews, such as to know that Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur and Passover are important religious holidays, or that the weekly Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday

⁵ Tirosh-Samuelson, Hava (2000) "A Jewish perspective on Religious Pluralism" in *Macalester International*: Vol. 8, Article 11. Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macinto/vol8/iss1/11>

⁶ See www.ceji.org for more information on this non-profit organisation founded in 1991 in Brussels.



and ends at sundown on Saturday, or that there are specific dietary restrictions for religious, and many non-religious, Jews. The most basic religious literacy would need to recognize that even non-religious Jews may likely be celebrating Passover with their families, as non-religious Christians will celebrate Christmas. If policy-makers in schools and public authorities could have even this basic religious literacy, there could already be a positive difference made in the experience of Jews in Europe. Obviously, similar parallels can be made for other religious minorities.

To create an environment that is truly inclusive, however, also requires sensitivity to the issues which are important for any collective group of people. For Jews in Europe today, two of those most highlighted issues which are often misunderstood, misused or trivialized are the Shoah⁷ and Israel. Religious literacy in 21st century Europe would require, for example, an understanding of the significance of the state of Israel in the history of the Jews, an ability to discern when criticism of this diverse nation falls within the realm of democratic participation or when it is used as a mask for the expression of antisemitism, and to recognize how medieval and Nazi-era antisemitic conspiracy theories are propagated in so-called anti-Zionist or Holocaust denial propaganda.

There is an ethical imperative in the development of religious literacy in Europe, because without it, continued ignorance, scapegoating, hatred and violence is a threat to the future stability of the region.

Learning about religious holidays, rites and rituals, sharing in multicultural meals, experiencing services of worship of other religious traditions is the easy and most pleasurable part of developing religious literacy. However, it will remain only superficial and short-lived if we do not explore honestly the ways in which stereotypes, discrimination and hatred manifest themselves towards particular religio-cultural groups.

It is for this reason that the work of CEJI to create inclusive environments requires us to help dismantle the ideas and mechanisms that perpetuate prejudice and discrimination. This work of deconstructing discrimination, on the one hand, and constructing an appreciation and ability to thrive in diversity, on the other hand, is essential to achieving our vision of a Europe in which all people can enjoy their full potential. The primary tool which CEJI uses in this deconstruction/construction process is education, such as the

⁷ Shoah is the Hebrew term meaning “catastrophe” which refers to the Holocaust, when six million Jews were systematically exterminated by the Nazis and their collaborators.



award-winning suite of programmes called Belieforama: A Panoramic Approach to Issues of Religion and Belief.⁸

Through working with our own stereotypes and those of others constantly, the eyes open more and more towards other groups and way of life.

In a training with young people from all over Europe, I learned that an atheist in Poland can have similar experiences in terms of discrimination and exclusion as for example a Muslim in Germany. A discriminating majority in one place can be a discriminated minority in another. It all depends on the context and on the individual people. This helped me consider my own fixed views and stereotypes.

But I also learned in the same training, that this sharing of similar experiences of people with very different backgrounds can create new lines of solidarity. One young atheist within an activity strongly supported a religious Muslim's opinions, who he felt was trapped by a majority of people questioning her worldviews. He knew how it felt to be surrounded by a questioning majority and to be forced to defend yourself all alone, so he strongly started to support her. This beautiful experience of sudden and strong solidarity among people from very different backgrounds was not the only of its kind I have had during the trainings I gave.

Testimony of a Belieforama Trainer published in *Snapshots: Stories of Change*, available in the document library on www.belieforama.eu

First piloted in 2004 and still implemented today, Belieforama has been CEJI's contribution to facilitating convictional pluralism in Europe. Belieforama has brought an anti-bias diversity training approach to a field that was previously reserved for religious leaders. It aims to equip educators to facilitate learning, self-awareness, appreciation of diversity, and a sense of personal responsibility on the topic of religion and belief. Over 1,000 educators have participated in Belieforama train-the-trainer programmes, reaching thousands of additional people across the continent. The programme provides a secular space for believers and non-believers across the range of religio-cultural traditions to explore matters related to faith and living together from different perspectives, and find practical strategies for moving forward in our pluralistic reality.

⁸ For more information than will be offered in this article, see www.belieforama.eu.



Through the training I can create a safe space for a group of diverse participants which helps them to understand their own baggage of religious and cultural conditioning and the impact of religious stereotypes and prejudice. I have already delivered a lot of trainings with all kinds of different groups: teachers and educators, school kids and youth, interreligious groups and employees of the administration and I know that it works.

About 8 years ago I delivered some long term training for young representatives of different religions. The group consisted of Muslim, Jewish, Christian and atheist young adults. It was a really deep, sometimes painful but always dynamic experience for everybody participating. Since I stayed in contact over the years with some former participants, now I can see the fruits of it, which really makes me very happy.

Some of the former participants (...) developed to become important interreligious stakeholders in their communities and are now very active in the interfaith field. They do trainings with students of their own community to teach them religious openness and non discrimination and they organise interreligious gatherings and exchange and through all this they became really very important religious ambassadors for diversity and antidiscrimination for the whole city of Berlin.

Some of them directly told me, that it was the training which empowered them, to do all this and they thanked me. I am very proud of them. But actually which makes me the happiest is the friendship which some of the participants developed and provides us in Berlin with a kind of informal interfaith network.

Testimony of a Belieforama Trainer published in *Snapshots: Stories of Change*, available in the document library on www.belieforama.eu

Subject-specific programmes such as Overcoming Antisemitism and Overcoming Islamophobia are within the Belieforama suite of programmes as well. These programmes provide educators with the tools needed to raise awareness about Jewish and Muslim communities respectively, their diversity, basic religious and cultural traditions, the stereotypes and discrimination which they face, and to facilitate a productive dialogue about the specific issues in Europe in relation to these two distinct identity groups. All of the CEJI training programmes take a dual approach of raising awareness and developing a sense of personal and social responsibility within a participative learning environment that promotes trust and reduces the impact of fear. These methods are all rooted in the Jewish tradition and are part of CEJI's way to make a Jewish contribution to an inclusive Europe.



Literacy presumes education

The importance of education in the Jewish tradition goes back to Rabbinic times, when “the moral and religious training of the people from childhood up was regarded by the Jews from the very beginning of their history as one of the principle objects of life...⁹. The word Torah itself comes from the underlying verb *yarah*, the “most common meaning is something like ‘to educate.’”¹⁰

The Jewish historian Josephus Flavius records that the two major Jewish groupings during the later Second Temple period were the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Pharisees advocated “the study of both the Written and Oral Torah by all Jews, thus in some sense democratizing education and undercutting Sadducee domination. They effectively pitted the common people against the more aristocratic Sadducees.”¹¹

When the Sadducees lost control of Jewish society with the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans, the Pharisees were able to persevere and shape the becoming of Judaism today. This allowed for the flourishing of what we now understand to be a Jewish approach to education.

This illustrates not only the crucial role of education and literacy in the Jewish tradition, but it also demonstrates that in order to fully understand religious practices, one needs to consider the relevant formative cultural and political struggles over these practices. With the burning of the Second Temple, there were no longer biblical priests who had been only connected to this pivotal religious centre. “Instead their pedagogic-exegetical role was taken over by rabbinic teachers. Therefore, a rabbi’s role as leader is chiefly to educate.”¹²

This story from Jewish history helps to reinforce the definition offered by Diane Moore of religious literacy, in which she “presumes that religion shapes and is shaped by the social/historical contexts out of which particular religious expressions and influences emerge.”¹³ It also supports the theories of one of the most influential modern educators in the field of literacy development – the Brazilian Paulo Freire (1921-1997) – whose works have been translated into multiple languages, the most well known being *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972).

⁹ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13302-school-school-teacher>

¹⁰ Klener, Julien (2014) “The Tanakh in the Jewish Tradition” in *Sacred Books in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. BAI Publishers, p. 46.

¹¹ Acemoglu, Daron and Robinson, James (September 3, 2012) [Why Nations Fail Blog](#).

¹² Klener, Julien (2014) “The Tanakh in the Jewish Tradition” in *Sacred Books in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. BAI Publishers, p. 46.

¹³ Moore, Diane L (2016) “Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach” in *World History Connected*: Vol.4, No. 1. Available at: <http://worldhistoryconnected.press.illinois.edu/4.1/moore.html>



Through adult literacy projects aiming to deal with a variety of social and educational issues, Freire developed what is now known as “critical pedagogy”, defined by Freire’s close collaborator Ira Shor¹⁴ as:

*Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions, to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse.*¹⁵

Freire and Shor, like the Pharisees, understood that literacy meant more than the ability to read and write. Literacy is essential to better understand the world around us, to be able to analyse problems which we face, and to be active participants in making the world a better, more egalitarian place.

The Jewish identity would not have survived these three thousand years without a religio-cultural commitment to education, not only for the purpose of religious instruction, but to ensure the survival and success of the Jewish people in the various contexts in which they found themselves. For Jews, it is essential to assure one’s literacy and therefore survival in a religiously plural world.

Jewish Education as Critical Pedagogy

The Jewish people are, amongst themselves, an example of religious pluralism, reflecting an amazing heterogeneity in part due to the fact of having lived, until recently, in a global diaspora. The capacity to sustain a strong collective identity despite differences in nationality and religiosity is a further testament to an internal acceptance of diversity, albeit not without passionate debate. In fact, it is the religio-cultural tradition of argumentation that is so striking in the Talmudic method of Jewish religious instruction which helps to sustain the Jewish community in the face of internal and external changes. The culture of debate has been a unifying factor for Jews throughout history and across the world.

Called the Talmudic hypothetico-deductive method of text interpretation, those who are not accustomed to being challenged and probed may feel disconcerted by a Jewish approach to learning.

¹⁴ Biography on Ira Shor: http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-94-6209-374-4_29#page-1

¹⁵ Shor, Ira (1992) Empowering Education. University of Chicago Press, p. 129.



“Confronted with a statement on any subject, the Talmudic student will proceed to raise a series of questions before he satisfies himself of having understood its full meaning. If the statement is not clear enough, he will ask, 'What does the author intend to say here?' If it is too obvious, he will again ask, 'It is too plain, why then expressly say it?' If it is a statement of fact or of a concrete instance, he will then ask, 'What underlying principle does it involve?' If it is broad generalization, he will want to know exactly how much it is to include; and if it is an exception to a general rule, he will want to know how much it is to exclude. He will furthermore want to know all the circumstances under which a certain statement is true, and what qualifications are permissible.”¹⁶

Coming back to the definition of religious literacy by Diane Moore, it is crucial to recognize that the abilities to “discern,” “explore,” and “analyze” are as important as having basic knowledge about religions. This is an essential distinction to recognize, because no person can have all the knowledge about all the religions and their denominations within each political or social context in which they are living. Therefore, as society and circumstances are in a state of constant flux, it is crucial that people today have the ability and desire to be curious, to ask questions, to probe for deeper understanding, to doubt, and to be willing always to consider new perspectives.

This distinction was the core challenge which CEJI sought to address in 2004 with the first Belieforama training on Religious Diversity and Anti-Discrimination. How can educators, who are not necessarily experts in any one religion and certainly not all of them, have the tools they need to facilitate learning on religion and belief diversity, and to do so in a secular context?

Jews are not “Banking”

Returning to the concept of critical pedagogy for literacy development, there are many similarities between what Paolo Freire proposes as educational methods and that which has been at the core of Jewish religious instruction since the beginning of the Common Era.

Freire referred to the traditional educational model as “banking” through which the teacher makes knowledge deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat. “In the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who

¹⁶ Ohr Somayach International in Shema Yisrael Magazine (1974). Available at:
<http://ohr.edu/yomi/wouk/yomid.pdf>



consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing.”¹⁷ Freire criticizes the paternalism in this approach which is oppressing rather than liberating the potential of each person. Instead, the communication between teachers and students should be a dialogue wherein “authentic education is not carried on by “A” for “B” or by “A” about “B,” but rather by “A” with “B.”¹⁸ This traditional banking model which unfortunately is still quite common today requires students to memorize facts in order to pass their tests, rather than emphasizing understanding.

Ironically, despite the stereotype of the “Jewish banker”, banking is exactly what Jewish instructional methods do NOT do. In Jewish religious instruction, students are expected to question and internalize what they are studying, and in their active participation they are simultaneously serving as learner and teacher, helping to illuminate new ways of considering the text under study.

“The Talmud’s teaching method is based on a rhythm of word and reply, of arguments and rebuttals. In that sense it is based on critical questioning – in dialogue or in multilogue – about situations and texts, and from all possible points of view. This is a method that could be summarized prosaically as ‘Have we asked the final question?’ and which can undoubtedly broaden the fields of thought and understanding of both master and pupil.”¹⁹

The alternative to banking education is called the “problem-posing” approach by Freire, which involves “listening, dialogue and action.”²⁰ Students either identify for themselves a relevant problem or they are presented with one by the teacher and they must make use of the resources available to them to find solutions. This method honours the previous experiences of the students, develops the capacity for cooperative learning and emphasizes small groups for interaction and action on the problem posed.

Over the centuries, as Jewish communities have passed through cycles of integration and persecution, they have proven to be remarkably resilient in responding to new social, political and economic models. The critical pedagogy which is inherent to the culture of transmitting the teachings of Judaism could very well have been one of the keys to their survival. The development of critical thinking skills and a high awareness of oneself in relation to others is essential to solving problems and living in a pluralistic reality. As explained by Albert Einstein:

¹⁷ Freire, Paulo (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* p.58.

¹⁸ Freire, Paulo (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* p. 70.

¹⁹ Klener, Julien (2014) “The Tanakh in the Jewish Tradition” in Sacred Books in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. BAI Publishers, p. 49.

²⁰ Nina Wallerstein “Problem-Posing Education: Freire's Method for Transformation” Freire for the Classroom, Edited by Ira Shor. 1987. Pg 35



*The association of solved problems with those unsolved may throw new light on our difficulties by suggesting new ideas. It is easy to find a superficial analogy which really expresses nothing. But to discover some essential common features, hidden beneath a surface of external differences, to form, on this basis, a new successful theory, is important creative work.*²¹

Dialogue and Relationship with the Other

The Jewish tradition to question the religious texts and their teachers is in actuality a dialogue: it allows more possibilities for people to interpret the sources and apply them appropriately in a modern-day context. Literacy in this deeper sense of the word supports Jewish ability to adapt to new circumstances and contexts without compromising the essence of one's identity. It helps to explain oneself and one's religio-cultural traditions to others in a way that is meaningful beyond "what scriptures say." It facilitates Jewish relationships across differences within their identity group and also with other identity groups.

Renowned Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) explored profoundly the relationship between self and other in his 1923 publication *I and Thou*, which describes the qualities of the rare experience of a true encounter between entities. He distinguishes between two opposing concepts, Ich-Du (I-You) and Ich-Es (I-It), to categorize the modes of consciousness, interaction and being through which an individual engages with God, other individuals, inanimate objects and reality in general.

In the I-It relationship, two entities do not actually meet, but rather the "it" is understood by the "I" merely as a pre-existing idea or representation which is held in the individual's mind. This relationship is an illustration of how people encounter the "other" only through their prejudices and projected self-interests, therefore objectifying the "other" as an "it".

The I-You relationship is much more rare and precious. This is when true dialogue takes place because two beings meet each other in their authentic existence. There is no pre-conceived idea, judgement or objectification of one another, and the encounter is unstructured with no pre-meditated purpose. There is simply a being with, experiencing of, one another, with pure openness and no element of pursuit. If one would intentionally pursue an I-You relationship, the quality of "it-ness" would be created because the relationship would only be sought in order to fulfill one's own needs or desires.

²¹ Einstein and Infeld, The Evolution of Physics, (1938) pp. 287-7.



Buber argued that many of the ills of modernity are due to the predominance of I-It relationships through which we essentially function only in monologues, sacrificing our ability to be present to each other in true mutuality and dialogue. But as Buber and students of his have explored further, there is much hope for the I-It encounter which is in many ways part of the condition of the human mind. I-It meetings provide an opportunity for “temporal courage” which can be harnessed in order to deconstruct prejudices and open up new possibilities for relationship.²²

Another influential Jewish philosopher of the last century, Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995), explored the hermeneutics of lived experience in the world. In relation to the topic of religious pluralism and literacy, his concept of “face-to-face” relation is most relevant, meaning that, ethically, people are responsible to one-another in the face-to-face encounter. Specifically, Lévinas says that the human face calls us into “giving and serving” the Other.²³

“For Levinas, an ‘I’ lives out its embodied existence according to modalities. It consumes the fruits of the world. It enjoys and suffers from the natural elements. It constructs shelters and dwellings. It carries on the social and economic transactions of its daily life. Yet, no event is as affectively disruptive for a consciousness holding sway in its world than the encounter with another person. In this encounter (even if it later becomes competitive or instrumental), the ‘I’ first experiences itself as called and liable to account for itself.”²⁴

The work of Buber and Levinas highlight the important role of the “other” in understanding ourselves and in the educational process which must include the dimension of dialogue in the spirit of mutuality, encounter and equality.

Learning About Oneself through Engagement with the Other

The theories of Buber and Levinas have proven to be true in the Belieforama trainings delivered by CEJI throughout Europe with people from a variety of religio-cultural backgrounds. Through the interactive activities within the training, particularly those that explore participants’ concepts of personal identity, many leave the training wanting to know much more about their own religio-cultural roots. They would like to better understand the influences on their way of seeing the world, to better articulate the

²² Holba, Annette “Revisiting Martin Buber’s I-It: A Rhetorical Strategy in *Human Communication*. A publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association. Vol. 11, Nov.4 pp. 489-504.

²³ Lévinas, Emmanuel (1985) *Ethics and Infinity*, pp. 95, 98, 119.

²⁴ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available here <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/#OveLev>



meanings in the rites and rituals that they have always taken for granted, to experience more the richness available in their own and others' traditions.

"I very strongly believe that one of the strong points of this training programme and the philosophy of Belieforama is especially (...) that there is a space, a way of working, a very clear didactic approach, that in the group it feels okay that there is difference – we have to start at that point. We then create a space where people learn to listen to themselves about their own identity and to listen to others and to confront issues in order to be a more able citizen and to go into social action."

Testimony of a Belieforama training participant received in the context of a survey conducted by Prof. Dr. Paul Weller of the University of Derby towards production of the *Belieforama Policy Brief: Learning from Experience, Leading to Engagement*, available in the document library of www.belieforama.eu.

For some, multifaith engagement can feel as a threat to one's own identity; a risk of dilution. In CEJI's experience, and in the philosophies offered by Buber and Levinas, it is the contrary. Engaging with the other is an opportunity to deepen one's own identity, engendering respect for the other who has helped serve a process of self-awareness. Engaging with the other can help to strengthen identity-affirming connections while reducing vulnerability to segregationist communitarism. Any programme to develop religious literacy must take this aspect of learning into account. Learning about the other inherently implies a learning about oneself, but the pedagogical approach should allow for an open dialogue which reduces the impact of pre-existing filters which could prevent an authentic encounter with the other, and thus with oneself.

"In our interconnected world, we must learn to feel enlarged, not threatened, by difference."
Rabbi Jonathan Sacks from The Dignity of Difference (2003)



“This training program has convinced me by the power of its learning process gradually leading to reflection, introspection, awareness, the questioning, the fight against prejudice and the transition to action. In this training, we learn not only with our head but with our emotions, not only individually but also in contact with a diverse group, not only theoretically but also by confronting reality with tough questions.

On a personal level, the training has allowed me to question the subjects that I have never questioned before, for example: where do my images of God come from? What influence have my surroundings and my society had on my beliefs and convictions? The program helped me discover the concrete uniqueness of each religious identity and capture the uniqueness of each religion. I developed a greater sensitivity and empathy for people discriminated against or disadvantaged in society because of their beliefs.

At the professional level, this training gave me concrete tools to create time and space for reflection and dialogue with people of diverse faiths and cultures.”

Testimony of a Belieforama Trainer published in Snapshots: Stories of Change, available in the document library on www.ceji.org