

**Council of Europe 2017 Exchange on the religious dimension of intercultural dialogue: Migrants and refugees: challenges and opportunities – What role for religious and non-religious groups?**

**Feedback to discussion paper RENC(2017)3-final 13/09/2017**

In general the discussion paper does not deal much with chances or opportunities (as promised in the header), but mainly with the status quo and the challenges it presents. Missing is a future-oriented perspective that takes into account the causes instead of solely combatting their symptoms.

The political, social and economic challenges Europe is facing, entail the chance to analyse and reflect on the causes of forced migration and to rethink our position in order to eliminate injustice. Forced migration is linked to unequal distribution of wealth: much of our wealth comes at the expense of the so-called Third World.

How can we prevent a further mass immigration of refugees or forced migrants to Europe? How can we extend human duty to help those in need, inside and outside Europe, and prevent future suffering for generations of humanity? These questions need to be addressed commonly.

**Sub-theme 1 - "From reception to integration: the role of religious communities and non-religious beliefs"**

**1. What role do religion, religiosity and concepts of faith and secularism play in the lives of migrants themselves with respect to integration?**

Most of the migrants are not labor, but life migrants. Fanatic Islamist terrorists are threatening entire populations, not just the religious and ethnic minorities. They even accept and cause suffering to people of Islamic belonging.

They have lost, maybe for ever, their home and homeland, and are afraid to loose their cultural identity too. Understandably many of those who are in such a threatening situation, try to find a spiritual home in their local FBOs, where they can maintain their first language, celebrate their religious and national holidays, and preserve their

cultural heritage. This can lead to an isolation which aggravates integration and facilitates the danger of radicalization.

**2. What is the role of FBOs in the integration of migrants' and refugees' religious identity? Do they advocate for the accommodation of their religious needs?**

FBOs have a great responsibility, they can either take advantage of this situation and consciously or unconsciously misguide people, try to proselytize them, or they can provide concrete service and help people to understand the different context including the compatibility of human rights with religious beliefs, and to develop openness towards the religious and non-religious others. Which direction is taken depends on “theological” competence, attitude and views, thematic and social competence, and leadership qualities of those who are responsible within the FBOs.

**3. What lessons could be learned from the specific ways in which FBOs and non-religious organisations interact with refugees and migrants?**

The largest Buddhist refugee communities in Europe are Vietnamese (about 2 million mainly in Germany and in France) and Tibetans (mainly in Switzerland). Following in the footsteps of the 14th Dalai Lama who left Tibet in 1959 more than 150.000 Tibetan refugees have since fled to India. In the 1960s many have also been settled by the Swiss Red Cross close to Zurich and Geneva. Today about 4.000 Tibetans are living in Switzerland. New arrivals are still applying for political asylum.

A problem that should be solved is that governments, in general, neither set any quality standards for FBOs nor provide supervised training in theology and religious literacy<sup>1</sup>. In Germany, for example, the government made special rules for clerics, which also apply to Buddhist monks and nuns from various countries exempting them from learning German in order to receive a permanent residence permit. In consequence some high ranking monks and nuns – highly educated in Buddhism, but without any general education –, provide education for others without having a real understanding of the culture and the legal system of their host country. Wishing to support FBOs Germany actually created a hinderance for their integration.

Another problem I noticed when talking to people related to refugee accommodations in the city of Hamburg is that religion or spirituality is widely ignored. Rather, for example, some Sikhs from Hamburg claim that Sikh orphans from Afghanistan have

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<sup>1</sup> For a definition see <https://rlp.hds.harvard.edu/definition-religious-literacy>. Accessed 03 Nov 2017.

been treated like muslims, were forced to eat meat, although vegetarians, and their topknots were removed to make them look like other children. Also with regard to adults the responsible authorities seem to ignore their spiritual and religious needs, considering religion a dangerous topic which could create conflict. But one could, for example, integrate questions such as religion and spirituality as well as human rights into “family literacy”<sup>2</sup> practices.

## **Sub-theme 2 - “The role of religious communities and non-religious beliefs in the development of migration policy”**

### **1. What is the role of FBOs in combating xenophobia, radicalisation and defending freedom of religion or belief, including other religions or beliefs?**

Refugees and forced migrants, not only in the first generation, are exposed to the danger of radicalization. Terrorists who, during the last years, carried out horrible attacks in Europe, pledging allegiance to ISIS, were not migrants or refugees, but European nationals, children of immigrants. What radicalizes these young people is not necessarily poverty, lack of education or job discrimination – we need more information on what are the underlying reasons for radicalization. And why, for example, do 85 millions of Germans feel threatened by 2 millions of Muslims, who themselves feel threatened and are looking for security?

What can Buddhism contribute in this context? Buddhism encourages practitioners to develop openness towards all human beings and to respect religious others at eye-level. In the West since the 1970s a number of therapeutic applications based on mindfulness, emotional balance and mind training in love and compassion have been developed. They can be practiced by everybody, whether religious or non-religious. Therefore Buddhist FBOs as well as secular organisations inspired by Buddhism have much to offer with regard to peace work in a wider sense: prevention, conflict management, and post-conflict work (reconciliation processes etc).

### **2. What do FBOs advocate in terms of migration policy? Does their work shape the existent humanitarian practice and migration policy? If so, why and how are they able to make themselves heard and listened to?**

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<sup>2</sup> <http://literacy.kent.edu/familyliteracy/whatisit.html>. Accessed 05 Nov 2017.

Although there are many Buddhists who are engaged in humanitarian organisations, there are no Buddhist organisations specialized in migration policy. Buddhist organizations concentrate on hunger relief, medical aid, disaster relief, education projects, and environmental protection.

Good examples of Engaged Buddhism are Tzu Chi (literally “Compassionate Relief”) Foundation (Taiwan), the worldwide largest Buddhist welfare organisation, as well as Buddhist Global Relief<sup>3</sup> (USA). The latter is not only providing food aid and other material requisites for the Rohingya refugees living in camps in Bangladesh, but also urged Buddhist leaders to take “a strong stand against hate speech and ethnic cleansing”.<sup>4</sup> This humanitarian and human rights’ nightmare in Myanmar reminds us that Buddhists are not only victims, but also perpetrators.

### **3. What lessons could be learned from the specific way in which FBOs interact with the State in defining/implementing State migration policies?**

The way in which FBOs interact with the State seem to be very different in Europe. Social cohesion and peace in contemporary societies require from everyone – including the State, the FBOs, and the migrants – to respect basic principles such as equality and religious freedom, but also the readiness to take responsibility and accept certain rules in order to harmoniously live and act together. In case of Europe, taking gender equality and religious education at school as examples, this framework has to be the rule of law. This must be the basis for migration policy.

At the same time, it is important to understand that the Archimedean fulcrum, the idea of an objective or neutral standpoint, in practice does not exist. It is just an ideal concept. Nobody is neutral, and if somebody wears a religious dressing (like headscarves) this does not mean that the thoughts of the person on certain issues are necessarily dogmatic or non-dogmatic, and that someone who follows Western dresscode has always a neutral, pluralistic standpoint. A Western dresscode is not all over the world considered to be “neutral”. In Germany, for example, also at University, religious freedom allows believers to wear clothing that expresses their faith, just as one is free not to believe and not to wear clothes of a religious nature.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/index.php/en/>. Accessed 05 Nov 2017.

<sup>4</sup> For more information see: <https://www.lionsroar.com/buddhist-activists-appeal-to-myanmars-leaders-bring-aid-to-fleeing-victims/>. Accessed 03 Nov 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Conduct for Religious Expression at Universität Hamburg, released Oct 2017: <https://www.fid.uni-hamburg.de/verhaltenskodex-religionsausuebung-inkl-ausfuehrungsbestimmung-en.pdf>. Accessed 03 Nov 2017.

In this context it is not only imperative to integrate the religious dimension in intercultural dialogue, but also the gender dimension. Issues such as gender stereotyping, and the danger of exclusion are unfortunately only lightly touched in the discussion paper. Gender has to become a constitutive, indispensable and vital element of intercultural dialogue.

For many migrant families, traditional patriarchal structures, which are often religiously motivated and legitimized, play a major role. In several FBOs women do not enjoy equal participation in social life and even less in the religious sphere. They cannot equally contribute by preserving, teaching, and representing their religion. They have no equal access to religious leadership positions, and cannot independently observe all of the obligatory rules and rituals.

Very often FBOs justify a legally restricted status of women by an alleged specific 'womanly dignity'. This is in contradiction with a resolution adopted by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe 4 October 2005 that reads: "States must not accept any religious or cultural relativism of women's human rights." It is necessary to anchor gender justice with regard to religions and intercultural dialogue as a core theme in school and society. Research and a practice informed by research must be intensified and continued.