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Intercultural and interreligious dialogue: an opportunity for local democracy

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Summary:

Local and regional authorities are convinced of the need to promote intercultural and inter-religious dialogue at the local level, in order to strengthen social cohesion in our pluralist societies. Placing the emphasis on the cultural dimension of religious beliefs can highlight the positive social functions that religious communities play.

Local and regional authorities are willing to create the conditions for structured dialogue. They are invited to make an inventory of local religious and cultural networks in order to evaluate the needs of these different organisations.

With their knowledge of the local situation, they are in a position to create opportunities for different groups to meet and interact.

By maintaining regular contact with groups, they can encourage the exchange of information about the various cultural similarities and differences that exist between communities with a view to encouraging balanced and coherent social development.

R: Chamber of Regions / L: Chamber of Local Authorities
ILDG: Independent and Liberal Democrat Group of the Congress
EPP/CD: European People's Party – Christian Democrats of the Congress
SOC: Socialist Group of the Congress
NR: Members not belonging to a Political Group of the Congress



Introduction

1. The weight of the religious in European culture

Modern Europe is politically atheist, in the sense that political decisions are taken as if God did not exist, and yet the religious factor remains present, in other forms. It is these "other forms" we must now seek to understand¹. In so saying, François Foret, lecturer at the Free University of Brussels and researcher at the Institute of European Studies, clearly expresses the paradox of the situation in a number of European countries, if not the continent in its entirety, namely that the undeniable loss of authority of traditional religions is matched by the growing strength of an increasing number of religious organisations that are no doubt in a minority but more and more active for all that. The logical conclusion of Foret's proposition is that political leaders in particular should be recommended to take full account of these "other forms" in their future thinking and actions.

2. The management of cultural and religious diversity: a challenge for the democracy

- *The emergence of a new context*

European governments are increasingly faced with a polytheism of values and multiple cultural identities that more often than hitherto seek a basis in religious references and affiliations. The Mayor of Mulhouse, who is also President of the French association of city mayors, recently wrote that the majority of cultural demands now emanate from religions, particularly Islam, that were practically non-existent in France in 1905², when the law separating church and state was enacted. Everyone knows, from theoretical observation or practical experience, that this new situation is closely bound up with a general process of ethnic differentiation, itself in large measure the consequence of a significant growth in immigration. The process, which varies according to geographical circumstances but follows certain general patterns, serves to make ethnic and religious minorities stronger and more visible and increases their impact in the eyes of politicians. In particular, Islam's growing role in international relations has had significant repercussions. The debates surrounding different confessions, the training of community workers and public displays of belief have helped to crystallise opposing points of view. These developments thus give fresh impetus to the nature of the relationship between religion and civil and political society, which of course concerns much more than just Islam. The religious demands of those with an immigrant background are natural accompaniments to demands for recognition of their identity that are quite different from traditional concepts of political representation. This is one area above all others where it is necessary to think globally and act locally. New international power relationships are rapidly and critically making their effects felt both nationally and infra-nationally, in the latter case in an unprecedented fashion that inevitably creates new challenges. For reasons that appear, wrongly, to be paradoxical, this quest for identity is closely bound up with globalisation. Local authorities are thus in a key position to encourage intercultural and interfaith dialogue. Their knowledge of the various protagonists leaves them well placed to assess local cultural and religious diversity and enter into consultation and dialogue with representatives of religious confessions. Central authorities will no doubt also develop their own arrangements, but the question of how to deal with different faiths will arise first and foremost at the local level of municipalities and regions. What happens locally is now a matter of central concern because the diversity of local political and religious configurations is giving rise to new and different forms of recognition and models for action. In terms of how they both perceive and understand pluralism and identify persons capable of mediating in conflict situations, local and regional authorities are well placed to take account of religious diversity and make it an integral and innovative element of local democracy and social cohesion. The local level is the most appropriate one for considering religious differences less as a problem than as a resource.

¹ François Foret, "Introduction", in François Foret (ed.), *L'espace public européen à l'épreuve du religieux*, Bruxelles, Ed. de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2007, p. 19.

² Jean-Marie Bockel, "Grandes villes et gestion territoriale des cultes. Entre volonté politique et pragmatisme", *Pouvoirs locaux*, n° 69, 2006, p. 121.

3. The social role of religious institutions

This is not to under-estimate the upheavals and conflicts to which such differentiation may give rise. The aim is quite consciously to seek ways of making this challenge an indicator, or even more, an element of democratic debate. To put it another way, such differences are a real opportunity to test the solidity of civic relationships and strengthen and extend democratic interchange. The attention given by representatives of local and regional institutions to developing relations with religious confessions that are seeking their civic rights helps to mobilise resources that serve as building blocks for a society characterised by vitality, cohesion and interaction. What makes intercultural and interfaith dialogue so important is precisely the fact that such vitality, cohesion and interaction cannot be taken for granted. In certain respects, the citizenship dimension of religion resembles a matrix. It has great significance for those concerned, perhaps above all in areas of major social disadvantage, and may influence and modify all other aspects of coexistence. Religious confessions are not just the purveyors of social and cultural rites and services. They also contribute to their members' socialisation by helping to shape their individual and collective identities. Because religious identity has an impact on other areas of life and religious confessions are a vehicle of social consciousness, they shape their members' imagination, introduce them to symbolic thought and provide at least some of their cultural references and ideological representations. As such, they influence the way in which social relationships are regulated and hence the future of the political system, starting at the local level, and this influence is now more critical than in the past.

This requires them to adopt the Council of Europe's fundamental principles in an important area with a major impact on social cohesion:

- cultural diversity is an economic, social and political asset that needs to be taken into account and whose potential must be exploited if it is to bear full fruit;
- intercultural dialogue is based on respect for human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It reflects the most ancient and most fundamental form of democratic exchange. It is an antidote to rejection and violence.

These principles call for the recognition of multiple civic identities and shared values. It is easier at local than at national level to base the regulation of the different religious affiliations of the users of public institutions on practical negotiation or even experimentation. What is currently being practised is perfectly consistent with the concept of governance, in that the organisational arrangements associated with this approach presuppose a minimum of hierarchy and the establishment of networks based not just on absence of suspicion but on genuine confidence, and on what the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor³ has called the politics of recognition.

4. A better understanding of cultural and religious networks

Making "recognition" one of the main elements of managing pluralism requires a certain focus on the cultural dimension of religious affiliations – though without reducing them solely to the cultural aspect – and updating, locally and regionally, the networks between different religious organisations.

5. Building bridges between culture and religion

Because of the ideals they embody, religions naturally raise and enrich the objectives of dialogue and ensure that it takes place and develops in accordance with at least three fundamental principles: protecting each individual's human dignity, promoting human rights – including equality between women and men – and striving for harmony between religions and cultures. Differences should become not an obstacle but a strength, with diversity being seen as a common heritage to be shared. Stressing the cultural dimension of religious beliefs serves to define them in terms of their social function, even though they also embody meta-social truths and absolute values. It can be argued that this cultural dimension is to immanence what beliefs properly speaking are to transcendence.

³ Charles Taylor and the historian and sociologist Gérard Bouchard jointly chair the Quebec consultative commission on ways of accommodating cultural differences, whose establishment was announced by the Quebec prime minister on 8 February 2007. The creation of this commission shows that issues of religious and cultural diversity are certainly not just confined to Europe.

6. Avoiding the ghettoisation of religious minorities

One of local authorities' tasks is to establish a good understanding of the relative size and the organisation of local confessions, whose members are, or are likely to become, fully active members of the community. Awareness of the place and role of ethnic and/or religious minorities might usefully be accompanied by an equal awareness of the latent but real authority exercised by the majority, who in practice generally exercise a hegemonic, or even quasi-monopoly, power over local social and political institutions. Such an approach will throw light on, and help to prevent, situations in which minorities are pushed, against their better judgment, into defensive postures in which they simply make demands. The religious element – explicit or implicit – of urban conflicts poses a particular political challenge for public authorities. They first need to understand how and why certain active inhabitants base their identity and their action strategies on their religious affiliations and beliefs, and how and why this affiliation and these beliefs offer those concerned a response to their quest for meaning and the resources to develop a strategy they consider to be relevant and effective. To repeat, an assessment of such beliefs and practices and their effects must take account of the way in which the historically dominant majority culture and religious confession or confessions, which must themselves be called into question, function and transmit their values. In the absence of any equivalent experience to facilitate an understanding of the situation on the ground, for example, that of being a cultural minority in a foreign country, such an understanding has to rely on an assessment of how social codes are developed, established and inculcated. Recognising these social codes as social phenomena that are contingent, and thus by definition non-universal, is the best preparation for a positive understanding of minority organisations and the networks to which they belong. It is not possible to argue for local society to open its doors to minority religious organisations or cultural groups while refusing to recognise the prescriptive and unilateral elements of the host society's attitudes. Particular attention will be paid to the role of families, especially mothers, in transmitting their cultural values to future generations in a spirit of openness to local (and national) society.

7. Recognising cultural and religious identity: an important step towards social integration

- The specific place of young people at the cultural and religious level

Understanding religious landscape also entails a knowledge of the stages of its formation. We need to know how the ethnic patterns of our towns were formed and the origins of their informal networks of mutual assistance and institutional community practices, particularly in the religious field. We must avoid seeing even the recent past as uniform and becalmed, at a time when attitudes to foreigners and immigrants have changed profoundly, in a context that has helped to reinforce awareness of identity. This is particularly the case with Muslims, who were originally recruited as workers by employers in the developed European countries and had no marked religious identification and did not lay claim to such. As they settled and were joined by their families, they began to make religious demands and became more conscience of their identity. Finally, as the second and third generations entered the social fabric, new demands appeared, directly linked to their communal living conditions and their participation in various forms in local social and political life, through schools, cultural activities, voluntary associations and so on. Particular attention needs to be paid to the situation of young persons, in terms of both education and training and their place in local society as new citizens, and to ways of bringing them closer to all other young people, particularly through physical, sporting and cultural activities.

- A new role for Islam in Europe

Islam is of particular importance because of the number of its adherents and its international role. According to Catherine Withol de Wenden, in nearly every European country, as families with no possibility of return to their countries of origin settle definitively, parents become older and certain young people of immigrant origin find themselves with no real prospects, partly linked to discrimination in access to education, housing and employment, the existence of a form of Islam financed from abroad via Muslim associations has led to the development of a popular form of Islam which seeks to

negotiate its collective presence in a secular environment through a patchwork of citizen and Muslim identities⁴.

- Reciprocal influences between culture and religion

In European countries that have been strongly influenced by Christian religions, whether Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox, religious groups include dissenting Christians and ones such as certain Pentecostal movements or Jehovah's Witnesses that have developed within the Christian tradition, and others, such as Jews, Buddhists and, above all, Muslims, who fall quite outside that tradition. However, the work of recognition cannot be confined to such a dichotomy. Identifying the local religious landscape means understanding it in all its complexity and thus refusing in advance to adopt an excessively schematic approach. This complexity applies to all social phenomena, because of the close interlinking of a significant number of dimensions that are strongly represented in ethnic, cultural and religious diversity, including national origin, affiliation to national and/or international networks, place in the urban fabric, geographical discrimination that reinforces social discrimination, division of work between women and men, festive and cultural events, specific dietary traditions and cultural heritage.

8. Laying the foundations of a structured dialogue

- Creating the conditions for a harmonious dialogue

Drawing up an inventory of local organisations and networks requires local authorities to participate in the generally peaceful confrontation of "supply" and "demand". Establishing a good knowledge of groups and networks carries a cost, since times and places then have to be found to make contact with those concerned, as a first step to establishing partners and needs.

Which partners? A distinction has to be drawn between the official heads of local religious organisations and the real leaders whose own activities, informal functions and mobilising ability mean that they are heard by both members of their community and the local authorities. These are the people who have to be identified and collaborated with, because their influence is critical.

What needs? Local authorities now face a growing range of religious expectations and demands. What Franck Frégosi has observed in France applies to many other countries: local authorities respond less to partisan or ideological differences than to elected members' personal preferences, which are often largely dependent on electoral considerations and the local climate of opinion. He notes that the imminence of an election is likely to inhibit even the most ambitious of mayors, particularly if they were planning a response to minority religious groups that generally evoke mistrust or even fear, as is still the case with Islam, despite certain significant changes⁵. Leaving aside certain criteria clearly laid down by central government, elected members are well placed to assess the situation and reach decisions in full knowledge of the circumstances.

- Understanding the new desire to be seen and heard

The issue of places of worship, involving the purchase or rental of existing buildings or the search for sites, does not just concern recently arrived religious groups. It also involves initiatives by historically long-established religious communities which, since the 1980s, have sought to give themselves greater visibility by adapting to urban change and the development of new neighbourhoods. To take just one example, in certain towns and cities there has been a return to the practice of processions, representing a greater commitment to outward and public manifestations of religion that extends to religious leaders who until quite recently would have spoken in favour of discretion and self-effacement.

⁴ Catherine Withol de Wenden, "Ville, religion et immigration", *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* (special edition: *Urbanité et liens religieux*), n° 96, 2004, p. 115.

⁵ Franck Frégosi, "Introduction. Les régulations locales du pluralisme religieux: éléments de problématique", in Franck Frégosi and Jean-Paul Willaime, *Le religieux dans la commune. Les régulations locales du pluralisme religieux en France*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 2001, p. 21.

Recent events have shown that proposals to build mosques regularly encounter opposition from hostile political quarters and ideologies and considerable reservations on the part of neighbourhood associations about any future cultural coming together. Anything concerning the marking out of territory and symbolic changes is likely to arouse suspicions.

Local authorities also have to deal with the rules of specific confessions. The most sensitive issue probably concerns demands to set aside sections of cemeteries for particular faiths, to which mayors generally respond pragmatically according to how they judge the local situation. A similar issue is that of dietary restrictions and substitute menus in school canteens.

9. Evaluating good practices, to understand each other's needs

a) Hamburg's inter-faith experiment

A number of examples may be offered of how to identify partners and the nature of their needs. In Hamburg, the Schura is a federation of some forty Islamic associations. The President of the university Islamic community has formed an alliance with Jewish community leaders to negotiate improvements to certain practices with the head of the university. As a result, a number of university restaurant facilities have been made available for the end of fasting during Ramadan and more vegetarian dishes are on the menu. Within the Land religious education, under the title of religious courses for all, has been taught for some thirty years, and is the subject of close co-operation between recognised religious communities and the education ministry. This instruction is based on an "interdenominational" curriculum and led, in 1995, to the foundation of the Inter-Faith Religious Instruction Group, which enabled non-Christian communities to become involved in drawing up syllabuses. This is typical of what is known as the Hamburg approach. Its success is inextricably linked not only to the personal commitment of those concerned but also to the quality and strength of the relations that have long linked government representatives to the North Elbe Lutheran Church and the Protestant community. This long learning process has resulted in an ability to understand religion, whatever the persuasion, as a means of developing and implementing policies that closely match the expectations and values of different sectors of the population.

b) Multiculturalism and interreligious dialogue in Catalonia

A different division of labour with regard to the political regulation of religious matters occurs in Spain, where the national authorities conduct official negotiations while local authorities are responsible for practical arrangements, the symbolic value and social potential of which are no less important. The interest shown by the local political institutions varies considerably according to the circumstances and context. It is greater in the large urban areas, where there is more variety of religions. At regional level, the Spanish autonomous communities play a major part in the political process and work closely with local authorities. Catalonia has played a particularly distinctive role in encouraging and organising interfaith dialogue.

According to the preamble to its autonomy statute, Catalonia enjoys a rich diversity of lands and peoples. This diversity, it continues, has been a source of identity and wealth for centuries and will strengthen the region in the years to come. The Catalonia authorities consider cultural diversity as an "inevitable historical event" and managing this diversity as "a new obligation and responsibility". In other words, this situation is not merely tolerated, but is fully accepted and even deemed to be a strength and an opportunity. One consequence of the autonomous community's position is that Barcelona is the seat of the UNESCO Association for Inter-religious Dialogue, which is a founder member of the United Religions Initiative, an international non-governmental organisation set up in 2000 to promote inter-faith co-operation. Other bodies have also been set up to foster interfaith dialogue, and there is a single forum for all the main religions. The Catalonian groups are federated into the Xarxa Catalana d'Entitats de Diàleg Interreligiós (Catalonian network for interfaith dialogue). It plays an important part in organising events to promote such dialogue and develop relations with the organs of government. In 2006, it organised the second Parlament Català de les Religions. Significantly, these activities coincide with the development of a genuine regional "religious policy". For example, the new statute of Catalonia, approved by referendum in June 2006, grants the Generalitat exclusive authority over religious entities active in its territory, which in this case means "establishing and regulating machinery for collaboration and co-operation to enable them to perform their activities within the jurisdiction of the Generalitat". It has set up a Directorate-General for Religious Affairs,

which is attached to the President's department and helped to mediate in the conflict over the plan to build a mosque in Premià de Mar, in the Barcelona region.

c) *The United Kingdom's Inter Faith Network*

In the United Kingdom, the Inter Faith Network was founded in 1987 to promote good relations between people of different faiths in the country. It comprises 140 organisations, divided into various categories: representative bodies from the main confessional communities; national, regional and local interfaith bodies; and academic institutions and educational bodies concerned with interfaith issues. Its main task is to establish good relations between confessions, but it has also encouraged numerous religious communities to become active in British public life. In 1999 and again in 2005, the network published *The Local Inter Faith Guide: Faith Community Cooperation in Action*, in conjunction with the Inner Cities Religious Council. In 2000, it organised a conference to examine local authorities' potential contribution to encouraging and sustaining the development of interfaith activities in their regions. The result was the 2002 *Faith and Community: a good practice guide for local authorities*, with recommendations on working with faith communities, and in particular on working in partnership. These initiatives have led to a significant expansion in interfaith organisations at national (23), regional (12) and local (about 220) levels. The number of local interfaith organisations, many of which belong to the network, has more than doubled in five years. The aim is to extend and strengthen the activities of local interfaith bodies, even though they have already fostered a major commitment and determination on the part of various confessional communities in their respective regions. The most effective interfaith initiatives all have certain features in common, including a high level of commitment from several key figures in the main religious communities, active development officers, both paid and volunteer, repeated efforts to develop an effective model for local interfaith relations and extend and diversify participation, with the active involvement of the most recently established communities, the mobilisation of resources from local authorities and other sources, even though the level of these resources is still fairly modest, and a local centre for interfaith activities to act as a clearly identifiable forum for exchanging views. In most regions, local authorities are making significant investments in faith communities. They recognise that strong and diversified local interfaith bodies can make a major contribution to developing community cohesion policies.

d) *Religious minorities in secular France*

In France, secularism is undergoing a form of recomposition and reassessment. Many local authorities and public bodies are arranging forums for different religions to meet, be they intercultural committees, inter-community networks, conferences and debates, all designed to achieve a better knowledge of religions and, even more important, closer mutual understanding. Marseille-Espérance is a good example of this development. This interfaith body was founded in 1990 by the city's socialist mayor, who also became its chairman. It brings together heads of the main religious communities in Marseille to consult each other and affirm, when the situation so calls, their commitment to living together in peace and mutual respect for each other's particular beliefs. Leaders of the Catholic, Protestant, Armenian, Orthodox, Greek, Muslim, Jewish and Buddhist confessions have established a genuine partnership of urban spiritual, community and cultural forces. They have regular discussions, not on religion as such but on any issue concerning the life of the city's communities. They take or support initiatives to promote dialogue, understanding and a climate of openness and respect towards others through mutual understanding. The objective is the same, even though participants may have different motives. According to Anne-Sophie Lamine, each community draws specific benefits from this shared approach. The Catholics can argue that they are no longer in a dominant position but are open to religious pluralism. Protestants have a role that is out of proportion to their actual numbers. The Orthodox community can make itself known and become part of Marseille's religious landscape. The Armenians' participation is mainly linked to their commitment to publicising the genocide they suffered. Jews naturally hope to see benefits in terms of the security and defence of their community. The members of Marseille-Espérance have a very strong sense that there is something unique in their experience. The approach is a secular one, but they still see a prophetic element in their activities, and hope they will be emulated. They are often approached by French and foreign groups of associations and institutions who are interested in the experiment, which in some cases they plan to repeat⁶. The

⁶ Anne-Sophie Lamine, "Quand les villes font appel aux religions. Laïcité et nouvelles prises en compte de la pluralité religieuse", *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine* (numéro spécial : *Urbanité et liens religieux*), n° 96, 2004, p. 151.

practice of common statements and declarations is based on the principle of reciprocity, to which consultative council-type bodies of this sort give high priority.

e) *Rome and the use of heritage for intercultural dialogue*

In Italy, the city of Rome has introduced a number of interesting and inspiring measures to foster mutual understanding and coexistence between different people and communities, especially immigrant groups, by promoting dialogue and openness towards others.

In particular, it has set up an "Interfaith Panel" which, over the period from 1997 to 2007, organised 11 meetings involving 1 517 primary school classes, 36 202 pupils, 103 research projects and 381 secondary school classes (8 715 pupils). The participants considered religiousness in daily life, the places of worship of the various religions, approaches to marriage and the basic rules of conduct governing the religions concerned.

A consultation and exchange forum ("Consulte") was set up in 2002 to build on Rome's cultural and spiritual heritage, drawing on the presence in the city of many religious communities of different origins and backgrounds. The idea was to focus on religious pluralism, interfaith and intercultural dialogue and respect for minority rights within the context of a municipal department responsible for drawing up policies concerning multiethnicity and interculturalism.

Through these initiatives, the city of Rome and other towns, municipalities, provinces and regions in Italy have sought to raise awareness of today's multiethnicity. The latter is seen as the starting point for achieving a new understanding of interculturalism, which involves going beyond merely recognising the actual situation in terms of the increasingly multiethnic nature of the population. Ultimately, the goal is to establish a network for the mutual exchange of knowledge concerning the different component elements of contemporary society.

Reference may also be made here to two other major initiatives taken by the city of Rome, namely the appointment of a number of assistant municipal councillors in the city council and in the city's individual districts (which reflect the urban decentralisation of Rome, forming small-scale municipalities within Greater Rome) and a consultative council to represent foreign communities. From the same angle and with a view to facilitating intercultural dialogue, the Rome authorities have also appointed "cultural mediators".

Intercultural exchange also demands good knowledge of individuals' own cultural and spiritual heritage. That was the thinking behind the establishment in 1999 of Italy's National Committee for the Heritage and Tradition of Mediterranean Culture, whose members come from central government and local and regional bodies.

All of these measures and initiatives demonstrate the strong political will in Italy to move the various levels of consultation and decision-making towards an increasingly cross-sectoral approach under a proactive policy for managing cultural diversity, involving all the component elements and key players in civil society in the process of establishing properly structured and lasting dialogue between all the partners.

10. Learning from experience

National institutions undoubtedly have much to learn from such peripheral initiatives, based on new forms of dialogue, consultation and negotiation and which seek to foster necessary intercultural and interfaith dialogue. The replies received from local and regional authorities to the questionnaire sent out in February 2007 by the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities as part of the preparation for the White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue illustrate the wide variety of activities undertaken. The operations reported are evidence of how much situations vary and the creativity of their originators:

- a Finnish cookery book compiled by women of immigrant origin living in an urban area where more than 60 cultures are represented;
- visits to their places of worship organised by religious communities in Augsburg in Germany;
- an ethnographic photography competition in Cluj, Romania;

- the youth programme "peace for your homeland", involving inter-ethnic exchanges in Stavropol, Russian Federation;
- a social inclusion project for migrants and Roma in Estremadura province, in Spain;
- a libraries initiative "Words without Frontiers" for minority groups in Kent, United Kingdom;
- a annual calendar of events organised by ethnic associations, published by the city of Odessa, in Ukraine.

Many of the projects reported have an educational element. They generally involve the introduction of special projects and teaching in local schools. Such activities make more minority language and diversity awareness courses available

11. Recognizing and overcoming obstacles

As well as identifying those concerned and their needs, it is also necessary to pinpoint the obstacles to dialogue, to determine not only what is desirable but also what is feasible. The answers to the Congress questionnaire highlighted a range of problems. In the case of the host population, they include the politicisation of local government, lack of vision and resources and the subconscious rejection of any foreign cultures. In the case of the new minority groups, they include the low socio-economic status of many immigrants, inadequate command of the host country's language, religious radicalism and, more generally, the fact that third generation immigrants are increasingly likely to identify with their cultural and religious origins.

12. Involving all the partners in the implementation of decisions

- Creating the conditions for the smooth running of intercultural and interreligious dialogue

The general principle underlying the implementation of decisions reached following negotiation is that the process and practice of dialogue are at least as important as the expected results. Or rather, the dynamics of the process and its capacity to mobilise those concerned are already an integral part of the outcome, whose general shape and content it determines. This is particularly the case when all the interests and parties concerned are involved in the process, in accordance with the fundamental equality of all the members of local society and the principle of non-discrimination. Because this approach is based on a rejection of any form of discrimination it can transform from within the rules of co-existence and local democracy. This can be related to the views of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities on local consultative bodies for foreign residents. Such bodies should not be the preserve of certain groups or elites, and the aim is certainly not to establish a form of two-tier citizenship. They should be seen as means of strengthening the day-to-day practice of local democracy, extending political participation to all local residents, encouraging them to act as citizens and opening the way to dialogue between elected members and ordinary inhabitants on ways of improving local management of the community⁷.

The notion of reasonable accommodation is now an integral part of the Canadian approach to conflict resolution and a direct consequence of the right to equality, but it also derives from an assessment of the role of religion in the public domain and social relationships⁸. This is the main method of dealing with the claims of recently established minority groups in a country where immigration – which is based on strict selection – is numerically substantial and very important demographically. The Canadian courts interpret reasonable accommodation as meaning the outcome of case-by-case negotiations, on matters such as days off for religious festivals, the display of sacred objects or prayer practices, between a minority group and a particular institution, such as a firm, government department or school. The aim is to negotiate a compromise between the two parties, and the benefits for the minority group must outweigh any disbenefits for or harm to the community at large. The process recognises the existence of more than one set of rules or norms, and is dependent on the apparent eligibility of the initial request. Because the outcome of such negotiations inevitably has more

⁷ Sonia Gsir and Marco Martiniello, *Local consultative bodies for foreign residents – Handbook*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, 2004.

⁸ See footnote 3.

general effects, the decisions must be justified, public and transparent. From this side of the Atlantic, the principles to be applied to this process are effectively those of "proportionality" and "reciprocity", in other words the need to strike a balance, in the name of equality and equity, between the respective positions of the minority and the majority on cultural and religious practices.

- *To know is to understand*

There is a valuable lesson to be learned from this listening and conciliation-based approach. Local authorities can also contribute to the process of discovering other cultures, by observing cultural similarities and differences, understanding minority groups whose outlook is different and at variance with local custom and practice and disseminating and sharing this information. They can do so by encouraging the teaching of the full range of religious knowledge, with a view to developing cultural knowledge and not religious practices. Such education, provided both at school and through civic religious study centres, will be a key factor in fostering greater openness and a quest for knowledge. Logically, greater openness to others should also awaken a desire for a better understanding of one's own faith or one's own personal and social values, and help to reduce the risk of radicalisation through greater cultural awareness, which is one of the key elements of dialogue. This approach will be guided by a desire to create the conditions for equality between women and men and to ensure that these are applied.

The wish to associate all the possible partners goes hand in hand with a need to redefine citizenship in accordance with new principles and constraints, and with social factors that vary widely from one area to another, in terms of multiple allegiances, multiculturalism, adapting religious buildings, combating ethnic and religious discrimination and establishing new rules for urban co-existence. European towns and cities have become, sometimes without being aware of it, areas of immigration. The consequences are often only recognised by politicians with difficulty and late in the day.

Conclusion: assessing the approach adopted and adapting future activities

- *Meeting*

If all the partners are to assess the implementation of the decisions to emerge from intercultural and interfaith dialogue in the same way, there have to be pre-determined criteria for or areas of evaluation. In consultation with religious organisations, local authorities will determine in advance indicators of and assessment methods for their joint activities. These might include the development of their own expertise and the establishment of networks for exchanges between faiths, the establishment of training and information centres on religion, and the gradual extension of the social groups and areas involved in the dialogue so that they are not confined to insiders and the religious and political elites. Local authorities should therefore enter into contact with representatives of other local authorities to compare and contrast their different arrangements, which may nevertheless be transposable, in order to develop their own particular approach.

- *Talking*

One of the basic rules of assessment is that account must be taken of the time factor and the pace of change of the groups concerned. It is worth remembering that the preliminary aim of dialogue is precisely to enter into dialogue, on the basis of the same shared values and common motives, without at first seeking to transform these discussions into action or activities. Dialogue is already an activity in itself, a form of learning process and exposure to others. In local as in international politics, it is a means to establishing active peace. It underpins and safeguards a source of ideas based on solidarity and geared towards future collective action. It offers a vision of humanity on the small portion of planet earth that it occupies.

- *Respect*

The second focus for assessment concerns the strict division of roles. The relationship between local authorities and cultural and religious groups can be characterised in terms of two key principles, namely organic separation and functional collaboration. In accordance with the principles of subsidiarity and religious autonomy, the authorities should not prescribe or organise such dialogue.

Each side should confine itself to its own role and sphere of competence. However, local authorities can act as facilitators and mediators, and possibly partners, but always on the basis of clearly defined and negotiated objectives and governed by a dual principle, both parts of which carry equal weight: neither indifference nor interference. The authorities' first role is to emphasise the notions of recognition and confidence, and to make it easier for religious confessions to establish a place in the public domain, based on their acknowledged or future social value and civic behaviour. It should encourage a more coherent inter-organisational structure and greater social cohesion. Moreover, in the interests of freedom of conscience, which is broader than just religious freedom, local authorities must ensure that agnostics and those who claim no religious affiliation are also given a voice and are not disqualified by a misapplication of the religious dimension of local citizenship. When it enters the public sphere, the process must be a dialogue of reason that dispenses with professions of faith and, even more, any proselytising.

The third assessment criterion concerns the transversal nature of the intercultural and interfaith dialogue. As one dimension of local life, this dialogue must not become self-absorbed or seen as an end in itself. It is only of value to the extent that it impinges on all areas of activity, including cultural creativity, education and dissemination, sport, urban planning, community and neighbourhood development, festive events and so on. The democratic management of pluralism is a matter for the entire community.

- *Trust*

Those concerned must aim high but proceed with caution. It is clearly impossible to gauge the standard of intercultural and interfaith dialogue, any more than one can measure the degree of social cohesion. These indicators must therefore be seen as tools for identifying, during the process, the most appropriate ways of making the transitions from ignorance to knowledge, knowledge to understanding, and understanding to confidence. Relevant activities might include visits to different places of worship or the establishment of an annual intercultural or interfaith forum or festival. This could be accompanied by the institution of a council for intercultural and interfaith relations, as a focus for multilateral exchanges of view. However the expected progress in terms of social cohesion and the exercise of local democracy cannot be totally equated with such an institutional approach. Local authority activities should be guided by a commitment to making it possible within their areas to believe in a God with many faces.