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Faith in Intercultural Cities

Recognising religions as part of local diversity, and exploring how they can contribute to the diversity advantage of cities

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Introduction

Different religious faiths and other worldviews form an important part of the growing diversity of many contemporary cities. However, national governments and local authorities across Europe often find it challenging to engage effectively with them, and to encourage those who hold diverse views and practice diverse faiths to relate positively with each other. This briefing paper sets out:

1. why engaging with those holding and living out different religious faiths and worldviews is an important dimension of the activities of intercultural cities, and can contribute to their 'diversity advantage'.[2]
2. some examples of how this might practically be done, including opportunities for learning from others' experiences about how related challenges and dilemmas might be overcome.

To do this, the briefing paper summarises the findings of a two day interactive seminar held on the 19th and 20th March 2014 in the London Borough of Lewisham, UK that involved 28 participants from across the Intercultural Cities Network.[3] This initiative seeks to "support cities in reviewing their policies through an intercultural lens and developing comprehensive intercultural strategies to help them manage diversity positively and realise the diversity advantage".[4] The network is co-ordinated by the Council of Europe as a joint initiative with the European Union. The briefing paper draws upon the critical comparison of related perspectives, examples and research contributed by those who participated in dialogue during the event, in order to consider potential ways to develop policy and practice in this area forward.

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[2] The concept of 'diversity advantage' has been significantly developed within the Council of Europe, being understood by the Intercultural Cities programme as "regarding migrants and minorities as a resource for local economic, social and cultural development, and not only as vulnerable groups in need of welfare support and services, or as a threat to social cohesion." (*Intercultural Cities Milestone Event Programme*, 6th-8th February 2013, Dublin, Ireland).

[3] Participants included public officials and expert practitioners, as well as the event organisers. Grateful thanks are extended to all presenters and participants, the London Borough of Lewisham for hosting the event, the Council of Europe for supporting the event as part of the Intercultural Cities initiative, and to Chris Diming for further practical support. The full list of participants with short biographies is available at: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Cities/meetings/lewisham/Bios.pdf .

[4] http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Cities/Default_en.asp .

The European Context

Actions across Europe to protect and respect religious freedoms for all within an agreed common legal framework on human rights have been a key part of the Council of Europe's activities since its inception, being enshrined in the European Convention on Human Rights adopted in 1950. Building on this basis, the Council of Europe has previously provided support in principle for the potential of interfaith dialogue to contribute to broader intercultural dialogue strategies. At the same time, the Council of Europe has sought to uphold the fundamental rights of all people, and hence not privilege or discriminate against any particular religion or alternative worldview. This continued support is illustrated by the following Assembly of the Council of Europe resolutions from 2006 and 2007 respectively:

> "The Assembly encourages intercultural and interreligious dialogue based on universal human rights, involving – on the basis of equality and mutual respect – civil society, as well as the media, with a view to promoting tolerance, trust and mutual understanding, which are vital for building coherent societies and strengthening international peace and security."[5]
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> "The Assembly therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers … rule out any interference in religious affairs, but consider religious organisations as part of civil society and call on them to play an active role in the pursuit of peace, co-operation, tolerance, solidarity, intercultural dialogue and the dissemination of the Council of Europe's values."[6]

Related rights have included freedom of thought, conscience and religion (including the freedom to have no religion), and freedom of association and expression, subject only to any limitations that are necessary to safeguard a pluralistic, democratic society. In practice, the interaction between different rights within particular circumstances has led to complex contextual judgements about the application of these principles by national courts and the European Court of Human Rights.[7] In these, the European Court of Human Rights has generally recognised a high degree of appreciation between different national stances on matters relating to religion and belief, and the need for national governments not to unduly interfere in intra-religious matters. The diversity between countries includes significant differences in the relationship between the state and religious groups across Europe in principles, laws, constitutions and policies.[8] This diversity has also been seen in the different roles that different religious groups have historically played in different countries within Europe.

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[5] Resolution 1510 (2006) 'Freedom of expression and respect for religious beliefs', adopted 28 June 2006 (19th Sitting), http://www.assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta06/ERES1510.htm .

[6] Recommendation 1804 (2007) "State, religion, secularity and human rights", adopted by the Assembly on 29 June 2007 (27th Sitting), http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/EREC1804.htm .

[7] European Court of Human Rights (2013) 'Factsheet: Freedom of Religion', July 2013, Press Unit of the European Court of Human Rights.

[8] Foblets, M. and Alidadi, K. (Eds) *Summary Report on the Religare Project*: *Religious Diversity and Secular Models in Europe: Innovative Approaches to Law and Policy*, available with related resources from http://www.religareproject.eu/ .

Nevertheless, the Assembly of the Council of Europe has actively opposed all hate speech and violence against particular individuals or groups on grounds of religion, as well as violence based on the "manipulation of religious belief for terrorist purposes".[9] Related activities have included seeking to "protect women and girls and to ensure that religion can never be invoked to justify violence against women".[10] At the same time, it has encouraged open debate and promoted the toleration of critical dialogue between groups in the public sphere, as well as the decriminalisation of any remaining blasphemy offences within national laws.[11] The Council of Europe has also encouraged thought to continue to be given to the "religious dimension of intercultural dialogue, particularly by organising meetings with religious leaders and representatives of humanist and philosophical worlds". Furthermore, they have promoted the identification and dissemination of "examples of good practice in respect of dialogue with leaders of religious communities".[12]

This paper seeks to build an approach starting from these foundations, learning from the innovative research and practice taking place across the Intercultural Cities network, in order to help them develop them further on a local level and enhance the diversity advantage of these cities, as well as others who adopt similar approaches.

[9] Parliamentary Assembly Resolution 1928 (2013) "Safeguarding human rights in relation to religion and belief, and protecting religious communities from violence", adopted by the Assembly on 24 April 2013 (14th Sitting), http://www.assembly.coe.int/ASP/Doc/XrefViewPDF.asp?FileID=19695&Language=EN . This resolution also provides a fuller list of other related resolutions, recommendations and areas on which the Assembly calls on member states to take action, beyond those summarised here.

[10] Op cit.

[11] Recommendation 1805 (2007) 'Blasphemy, religious insults and hate speech against persons on grounds of their religion', adopted by the Assembly on 29 June 2007 (27th Sitting), http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta07/erec1805.htm .

[12] Recommendation 1804 (2007) 'State, religion, secularity and human rights', adopted by the Assembly on 29 June 2007 (27th Sitting) , http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta07/EREC1804.htm .

Opportunities and Advantages Arising from Engaging with Religious Faiths and Other Worldviews

Across Europe, previous research has shown that faith groups' substantial contributions to civil society frequently include significant roles within cultural heritage/diversity[13], social capital[14] and the development of social welfare services[15]. They have also made significant contributions to public discourses/campaigns about ethics, morality, spirituality and the meaning of life, combining these different contributions in various ways.[16] These aspects all have significant potential to add to the wellbeing of citizens[17] and a city's collective diversity advantage. At the same time, much of this previous research indicates the complexity of relationships between religious belief, religious practice, participation in a religious group, and nominal religious affiliation, as well their diverse interactions with different cultures and migration histories.

The responses of participants within this workshop reflected this wider research in terms of the opportunities arising from engaging with religious groups. They saw such groups as a further way through which "to address citizens to build community", particularly recognising that these groups delivered "poverty/welfare services" and that they provided an opportunity to involve "different marginal groups which trust mainly to some religious institution". Participants from public bodies recognised that they needed to provide balanced "support [to all groups] and ensure the freedom and the rights to have a faith and also the rights not to have a faith".

The workplace was seen as one important place where these issues could helpfully receive more attention by public officials seeking to develop this further. For example, some highlighted particular related opportunities including organising a "meeting for our businesses and using these meetings to discuss faith issues that can [affect] work/employees" and "engaging faith groups when discussing dilemmas within our workplaces and in service delivery".

In addition to the workplace, the need to develop more diverse opportunities for building relationships between individuals and groups holding different perspectives was identified as being important. A range of practical opportunities were identified for engaging different groups in direct dialogue with each other. These included "sharing in an interfaith group [that is] specifically trying to facilitate engagement",

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[13] Parekh, B. (2006) *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

[14] See, for example, Furbey, R., Dinham, A., et al. (2006) *Faith as Social Capital: Connecting or Dividing?*, Bristol: The Policy Press, building on understandings of social capital developed by key theorists such as Robert Putnam, Pierre Bourdieu, etc.; for a summary of these theorists' perspectives, see Field, J. (2008) *Social Capital (2nd edition)*, Abingdon: Routledge. For a gateway to related research, see: http://www.socialcapitalgateway.org/ , which includes a section on 'Religion and Social Capital'.

[15] Bäckström, A., Davie, G., et al., (Ed.) (2010) *Welfare and Religion in 21st Century Europe: Volume 1. Configuring the Connections*, Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate

[16] Jawad, R. (2012) *Religion and Faith-Based Welfare: From Well-Being to Ways of Being*, Bristol: Policy Press.

[17] See, for example, the diverse research contributions in Atherton, J., Graham, E. and Steedman, I. (Eds) (2011) *The Practices of Happiness: Political Economy, Religion and Wellbeing*, London: Routledge.

"scriptural reasoning" discussions, "collaboration with [existing] shared platforms for dialogue", holding "dialogue days" and organising "dialogue meetings between various faith and life stance communities", including those without religious views.

Others suggested organising or supporting other shared groups and events which were less immediately dialogue-oriented, but through which interaction could nevertheless happen. These included through sharing food, interfaith cultural events and music festivals. More individually-focused ideas included enabling those holding diverse views and religious affiliations to spend "time together in the private arena, visit each other's homes, go to theatre, take part in each other's holy feasts", and go on shared walks together. One city had developed an 'open mosque' and 'open church' to welcome individual visitors to find out more. The creation of newly-shared physical and virtual spaces provided other opportunities for mutual engagement, whether (for example) through sharing buildings or through using "the internet to encourage networking between faith groups, and between faith groups and the wider community, by creating a digital 'community space'".

A particular concern for participants was finding ways to develop more effective ways of supporting interfaith dialogue and mutual understanding between diverse perspectives/groups in schools and amongst young people. One innovative idea which had been developed for doing this was a photo competition for young people on 'Religion in Copenhagen' which had provoked widespread positive engagement. Similar initiatives could also be useful when promoting cities as potential tourist destinations to wider markets by reflecting the interesting nature of local cultural and religious diversity.

Given this range of potential opportunities, the development of wider strategies to support this engagement was seen to be helpful by the participants. To be most effective, these should reach out to different potential stakeholders and operating at different levels simultaneously.[18] For example, one participant from a local authority suggested the need to "create a long term relationship with the interreligious council and at the same time approach the grassroots level". A particularly innovative example of how this could be done was shared by a representative from Botkyrka in Sweden. This involved using a network of local people that had been proactively developed to counteract divisive rumours, in addition to organising broader anti-rumour campaigns and supporting strategic inter-faith dialogue through a local UNESCO centre as part of their intercultural strategy.[19]

[18] Whilst many of those holding religious beliefs and/or belonging to religious groups are not necessarily migrants, many of the principles and practical ideas relating to generating cross-community interaction at different levels simultaneously that are discussed in relation to migrants in the following paper may be adapted to promote interaction involving those from different religions too: Orton, A. (2012) *Building Migrants' Belonging through Positive Interactions: A Guide for Policymakers and Practitioners* , Strasbourg: Council of Europe, available from: http://www.coe.int/t/democracy/migration/Source/migration/EnglishMigrantBelongingWeb.pdf .

[19] This pilot project in Botkyrka was part of a broader 'Communication for Integration' joint pilot project of the European Union and Council of Europe involving 11 cities; for details of the Botkyrka project, see http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Cities/Newsletter/newsletter31/botykr_en.asp . For details of the wider scheme, see: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/cultureheritage/culture/Cities/Newsletter/newsletter32/C41_en.asp .

Challenges and Dilemmas Arising from Engaging with Religious Faiths and Other Worldviews

Within wider research, the potential clash between different cultures, worldviews and religious perspectives has often been seen as creating challenges and dilemmas about how to evaluate their respective claims when these affect public debate and practices in the public sphere.[20] For participants, these were reflected (for example) in national controversies over the public wearing of face coverings such as the niqab for religious reasons (especially in France), which were seen as creating a highly emotive context within which local interactions took place. On issues such as this, the wider policy context was seen as crucial in either supporting or being detrimental to good interfaith relations on a local level.

These emotive debates about expressions of religious diversity in the public sphere were also represented in widespread common experiences of challenges relating to planning permission for places of worship and burial places for minority faith groups. Finding ways to accommodate different burial customs within local law had often involved considerable dialogue to find ways forward. Minority faith groups had often had difficulties in finding appropriate space to meet across a number of the participants' cities, and meetings held in inappropriate spaces had sometimes led to conflict with neighbours. Developing shared/interfaith spaces within regeneration developments had been one approach that had been tried by some cities such as Lewisham; however, this had proved to be a long and complex process, not least in terms of finding groups willing to co-operate over the use of shared spaces and finding ways to handle the ongoing management of any buildings developed. The involvement of wider stakeholders such as private developers in these processes was seen as important.

Prejudice and discrimination were key underlying issues within these debates which participants wanted to address, but they often found it particularly difficult to find appropriate ways to do this. This included when they wished to challenge:

- the prejudices of politicians and staff within public services against faith groups (whether in general, or against particular groups);
- prejudice and discrimination between faith groups; *and*
- discrimination against others (such as women or other faith groups) that people sought to try to 'justify' on the grounds of particular religious views.

It was also noted by participants that whilst religion was a strong bonding factor between members of religious groups, in some circumstances it may contribute to conflict between different groups, especially when religion became mixed up in politics. These issues can be exacerbated when they were combined with people in contexts experiencing pressing social needs such as poverty and hunger.

These concerns over prejudice and conflict led to a further set of challenges for participants which related to who was involved in the various engagement activities discussed. Engaging with a sufficiently wide group of people in dialogue activities was a particular concern. Some participants noted that only a small minority of people were interested in these activities, and that they sometimes (often

[20] E.g. see the discussion in Parekh, B. (2006) *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

unintentionally) excluded humanists, atheists, and other 'lifestance' communities which did not see themselves as religious in nature. Some cities had created specific platforms/mechanisms/forums for engaging and consulting with different faith groups over policy development. However, these varied considerably in their extent, focus, mode of operation and type of organisation, as well as in their level of support. Those involved in forms of interfaith dialogue and co-operation who were members of religious groups sometimes found that their involvement had led to criticism from certain members of their own faith community. Furthermore, policymakers and practitioners in local authorities often faced dilemmas over whether there should be any limits to who they sought to involve, particularly if some groups were perceived as holding radically different views or being 'extremist', prejudiced or cultic in nature. They were particularly concerned about not wanting to be perceived as giving such groups any official credibility, recognition or support. However, at the same time, some felt that to select some groups and exclude others would exacerbate divisions and remove an opportunity for constructively engaging with these groups to challenge their views in so far as they prevented diverse groups living together peacefully.

Conclusion: Developing Improved Interfaith/Inter-perspective Dialogue

For interfaith and inter-perspective dialogue to support positive interactions between groups and help address the challenges outlined above, a range of questions for policymakers and practitioners to consider that were proposed by the facilitator were found by the participants to be helpful. These questions included considering what the dialogue was for; e.g. whether its purpose was to build mutual understanding and community cohesion, involve different faith groups in working together on issues of shared concern, represent collective views to local government, etc. The questions also included thinking carefully about who was involved in the dialogue (and who was missing). Recognising diversity *within* religious groups as well as *between* religious groups was a particularly important part of this, which meant finding ways to involve significant groups (such as women) otherwise excluded from official leadership roles within some religious communities. Furthermore, finding positive and creative ways of engaging with those who would not normally be interested in connecting with people of other faiths was seen as crucial in broadening the scope and impact of these activities.

Where civil servants lacked knowledge of faith and faith groups, it was recognised that this can lead to fear and raise barriers to building positive engagement between them. Therefore, training professionals to interact with different groups and work positively and proactively with these issues (including in schools) was seen as particularly important. However, it was considered essential to develop the approach for any training carefully, to work with people starting from their experiences and challenges, rather than imposing one specific way in which they need to change.

Where local authorities and states considered themselves to be secular in nature, the participants' discussions also pointed towards a need to rethink what they understood by being secular. For those local authorities who sought a complete secularisation and separation of religious groups from any of their activities, engagement with any faith groups can seem difficult on principle. The adoption of this type of secularised understanding may also exacerbate faith groups' feelings of being invisible in policy processes and lead to them being ignored as a potential resource in local work. Many of the local authorities who participated in this workshop had in practice sought to develop a more holistic strategy to acknowledge and engage with faith groups in some way, whilst operating using a range of different views on what principles should be adopted in doing this. One participant helpfully summed up a number of perspectives by encouraging policymakers and practitioners to think about what could be done in their city by not just thinking of the physical, but also engaging with different faith and spiritual perspectives; in doing this, he encouraged them to not see themselves as 'neutral' (having no view of their own), but instead as 'impartial' (not seeking to unfairly favour one group over another). Similarly, another participant saw it as important to create "shared space, not dominated by one faith group (and not "empty")."

Overall, principles of dialogue between stakeholders, reasonable accommodation, appropriate education, and inclusive even-handedness (as proposed in previous

research summarised by Feerick[21]) were agreed to be important potential ways forward in beginning to resolve some of the policy and practice dilemmas outlined. Participants emphasised that a key priority for moving forward building on these foundations was to find collective ways to discuss remaining dilemmas and to develop effective processes to address the continuing underlying conflicts in practice. One creative example of how this could be done was how the city of Botkyrka had facilitated public dialogue over requests for a 'call to prayer' from Muslims. The process adopted in Botkyrka had included explicit attempts to:

- recognise that any reactions should be seen in a wider context;
- agree shared values and principles that should apply equally to all groups in the city;
- involve a wide range of different perspectives in the discussions; *and*
- seek to proactively manage any conflict that may otherwise have arisen.

A key learning point was the recognition that it can often take considerable time, even years, to build good relationships and effective dialogue with and between different groups. As a result, it was seen as important for local authorities to invest in this relationship-building process and not expect instant results. Recognition of the potentially-different agendas of different stakeholders involved in dialogue processes was considered important in facilitating ways of bringing these together. Recognition of the diversity of different types and purposes of different dialogue spaces and opportunities helped participants in reflecting on which combination might be most appropriate for their particular circumstances. It was also recognised that interfaith dialogue was only one part of a much bigger picture, where wider issues such as hunger, migration, ethnic diversity, etc. played a significant role in shaping the context in which dialogue and interaction takes place. Hence, policies and social actions by faith groups and others to address underlying causes of conflict remained important.

Given the importance and complexity of this task, and the diversity of experience already discovered through the workshop, it was agreed that further opportunities to explore these issues, share experiences and engage with wider research would be very helpful. Multiple suggestions were made about creating a shared online/social media space to facilitate further information-sharing and dialogue about these issues between policymakers and practitioners. The sharing of practical case studies and a summary guide via publications such as the Intercultural Cities Newsletter and website was also suggested. Some participants were interested in supporting further research or trying out ideas in their local contexts, including running workshops in their own city. A follow-up event after a year was also proposed by two participants, to share their experiences from trying to apply their learning from this event in their local contexts, and hence develop their learning further. Some participants also offered to form a rapid response network to provide peer advice to others within the Intercultural Cities programme when they were developing work or responding to issues related to this topic.

[21] Feerick, S. (2013) *Religious Diversity and Secular Models in Europe: Innovative Approaches to Law and Policy: Messages to Inform Policy-Making*, May 2013, http://www.religareproject.eu/system/files/Religare%20Booklet%20B5.05.2013_v2.pdf .

Overall, the workshop demonstrated the considerable interest in engaging more effectively with issues relating to faith within intercultural cities. The discussions highlighted the importance of this engagement in further improving the diversity advantage of cities that do this. They also began to explore the challenges and dilemmas already facing policymakers and practitioners in engaging with related issues. Given the scope of these challenges, and the importance of engaging effectively in addressing them, further dialogue and investigation of these issues is important in order to further improve the understanding, training and development of practical ways forward for policy and practice in this area.