



This paper is taken from

*Lifelong Learning and Active Citizenship  
Proceedings of the twelfth Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2010

edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,  
ISBN 978-1-907675-01-0

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*Craviotto, O. (2010) "Working with Religious Diversity in Urban Contexts" Source of conflict or an opportunity for social cohesion and active citizenship?, in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) Lifelong Learning and Active Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp. 045 - 050*

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CiCe  
Institute for Policy Studies in Education  
London Metropolitan University  
166 – 220 Holloway Road  
London N7 8DB  
UK

This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

#### Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## **“Working with religious diversity in urban contexts:” Source of conflict or an opportunity for social cohesion and active citizenship?**

Oscar Craviotto  
UNESCO Centre of Catalonia (Spain)

### ***Abstract***

*In Europe, the social dimensions of diversity have been for long understood more as problems and challenges to be resolved than as traits to be protected or encouraged. At least in the concrete case of religious diversity, this is so because the opposite (religious uniformity) has played a key role as a regulative idea organizing social life and communal identity of the nation-state and has played an important role in the shaping of a European citizenship. But although Europe's history explains (in part) our traditional rejection of religion, there are very important reasons to take it into account.*

*Yet, given the ambivalent nature of religion (of the “sacred”), in order to foster the positive contribution that religious diversity can make (and minimize the conflicts it often produces) to social cohesion, it is necessary to adapt and innovate religiously. Two related initiatives are good examples of how this can be done: the promotion of interreligious dialogue as a means for citizen's participation, social cohesion and conflict transformation in urban areas, and the development and dissemination of educational material on religious diversity as a preparation to active citizenship.*

*Both experiences have shown that by way of dialogue and collaboration, including in it those so-called “non-believers” (atheists, agnostics, skeptics or unconcerned), the positive potential of religious communities for peaceful coexistence initiatives can be released, breaking the cycle of radicalization and building social cohesion in close proximity areas, and helping shape, in real life, the conception of an inclusive European citizenship.*

### **I. Introduction, where we are coming from: Our European heritage.**

In Europe, the social dimensions of diversity (cultural, linguistic and religious), with their concrete expressions incarnated in individuals and communities culturally, linguistically or religiously different, have been for long understood more as problems and challenges to be resolved than as traits to be protected or encouraged. Persecuted and repressed in the name of national (or communal) unity, those people perceived as bearers of diversity were the object of negative policies aimed at the suppression of the non-uniform element. In this regard, religious uniformity has played a key role as a regulative idea organizing social life and communal identity of the nation-state, and although not necessarily imposed as religious uniformity in the shaping of a European citizenship, it has nonetheless played an important role in its idea: From the Roman Empire to the drafts of a European Constitution or the discussion of Turkey's inclusion in the Union, Europe has been thought in relation to one particular religion, namely, Christianity. The then cardinal Ratzinger said, in discussing his rejection of Turkey's inclusion in the EU back in 2004, that "Europe is a cultural continent, not a geographical

one. It is its culture that gives it a common identity. The roots that have formed it, that have permitted the formation of this continent, are those of Christianity. [...] In this sense, throughout history Turkey has always represented another continent, in permanent contrast with Europe.”<sup>1</sup> Given recent developments, it seems the now pope is not the only one in affirming a common European religious tradition as the continent's definitive identity trait.

But Christianity has never been uniform. Mainly after the Reformation, but present in western Christianity for centuries before, the many forms, rituals, expressions and traditions that call themselves Christian contrast with the idea of one Religion held by some. This, and the reality of other religious traditions and practices existing among Europeans beyond Christianity (Islam and Judaism particularly), together with social, economical and political changes and the formation of the nation-state, have given rise to a series of unsuccessful attempts to impose religious uniformity even in relatively smaller portions of Europe. The conflicts, persecutions and wars thus originated have evolved over time and given way to various forms of “solution”: From the imposition of one uniform state religion over a diverse population (*Cuius regio, eius religio* “Whose realm, his religion”), to secularism, or the complete separation of state and religion with the restriction of religion to the private sphere of life. In any case, religion has been perceived as a source of conflict or as a private matter.

Although Europe's history explains (in part) our traditional rejection of religion, there are very important reasons to take it into account, not small among them the fact that religion in general and religious diversity in particular still play a significant part in the process of defining Europe's identity, of which the preeminence of Europe's attention to Muslims is its clearest sign. As Stefano Allievi has put it, in the “public discussion Islam has taken on a crucial role among other religions, because in a certain sense it represents the extreme case (or to be precise, the case perceived as such) of pluralisation itself: discussion of and on Islam, with the historical and symbolic overload it carries with it, reassumes and in a certain sense replaces discussion about pluralisation.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet, if the current treatment of religion and of religious diversity corresponds either to a will of affirming but one tradition (Christianity) over others, or to the elimination of religious references altogether from public life and discourse, thus falling in the kind of “solution” that has been unable to respond to our current challenges, how do we deal with the religious dimension of peoples' lives in building an inclusive European citizenship?

Not only are we compelled by our (also) European tradition of Human Rights, in particular by the article 18 of both the Universal Declaration and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, to assure that the conditions for people to exercise this dimension of human identity are met, making room for the many forms it can take in the framework of a European citizenship<sup>3</sup>, but we also need to take into account the consequences of not doing so. Religious diversity is a fact and, at the same time, much more than that: it is a value that seeks to guarantee its recognition and respect. Not upholding it and defending it as value would mean that its nature as fact could continue to be perceived as a problem to be eliminated. Moreover, the silence on this issue might allow for alternative values to grow and become dominant in the

conception of Europe, particularly the definition of Europe's identity as mainly Christian or the perception that religion all together should be done away with, thus justifying the exclusion of the Other: the Muslim, but also the member of other religious minorities or of other convictions not necessarily religious. To feel the value of one's own religious identity acknowledged is essential for social cohesion, and excluding this dimension from the public space or, worst still, to have one's particular faith tradition treated as foreign to Europe, will be perceived as a rejection. Finally, the success of an alternative value (such as religious exclusion, indifference or the development of an exclusive Civil Religion) would obviously generate and extend conflict, discrimination and exclusion of those whose mere religious affiliation does not correspond with the majority's or the state's, relegating them, in the best scenario, to a passive citizenship, and in the worst, to a non-citizenship status<sup>4</sup>.

## **II. Taking into account the religious and spiritual dimensions of life in building active citizenship**

In order to build an inclusive European citizenship, it is necessary to both recognize the fact of religious diversity and to uphold it as value. To the last, we must count on religious and spiritual traditions themselves. But how can we do that if they are as much a part of the problem as the seem to be part of the solution? As R. Scott Appleby has indicated<sup>5</sup>, the ambivalence of the sacred implies that religious traditions have a potential for both good and evil. But as the same Appleby has said in another place, that means that “[...] if others adapt and innovate religiously in order to promote and achieve what they consider to be “the good,” why not, then, the advocates of peace, tolerance, justice, human rights? Why not fight “politicized manipulation” with “creative fidelity” to the tradition? [...]”<sup>6</sup>

Two related initiatives carried out by the UNESCO Center of Catalonia can work as examples of how this can be done, of how to “adapt and innovate religiously”:

*1) To promote interreligious dialogue as a means for citizen's participation, for social cohesion and conflict transformation in urban areas<sup>7</sup>.*

Although there are many different interpretations of “interfaith dialogue” (or “interreligious dialogue”), the conception developed in Catalonia<sup>8</sup> emphasizes elements of great potential for active citizenship. It allows for a broad interpretation of actors: from individuals to communities; from religious to religiously affiliated people to non-religious and atheist; from religious authorities and practitioners to religious communities' members and non-members. In any case, the key criteria is “local” people. Even in the case of institutions, it is people that participate of the groups, it is people that meet and talk and collaborate. Religions and convictions can enter dialogue only through the people who profess them. In other words, it is about bringing together people of various convictions and beliefs, on a regular basis, to get to know each other and to develop a broad conversation that involves collaboration, exchange, information and recognition. Assuming and defending the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, participants “represent” a broad spectrum of religions, beliefs and convictions<sup>9</sup>, as well as institutions, practices and organizations. But due to its local nature, this groups typify ways in which people actively participate and engage with one another, arriving to

the political arena in ways unexpected<sup>10</sup>. This has even allowed for direct and indirect political participation through the creation, in conjunction with local civic authorities, of official interfaith councils. This in turn has stimulated participation in domains directly related to religious local communities, increasing officials' recognition of minority faiths and “normalizing” the presence of newer groups in a given territory in front of public opinion, contributing to the valuing and respect of diverse religions and convictions and, also important, establishing trust relationships among religious communities and organizations, between them and civic society groups, and between them and local administration, which becomes necessary when conflicts with a religious component arise, having already established the networks and the trust (and the knowledge resources) that will permit its transformation.

By way of dialogue and collaboration, including in it those so-called “non-believers” (atheists, agnostics, skeptics or unconcerned), interreligious and interconvictional dialogue initiatives release the positive potential of religious communities, breaking the cycle of radicalization, and building social cohesion in close proximity areas.

*2) To develop and disseminate educational material on religious diversity: the role of education in religious diversity as a preparation to active citizenship.*

Another key aspect of valuing religious diversity is education. In this regard, the UNESCO Center of Catalonia's approach has consisted in defending a scientific and historical over a confessional approach to the teaching of religion in school<sup>11</sup>. A proposal for curricula for both primary and secondary school has been developed, and teaching materials produced with the participation of all religious traditions present in Catalonia.

Among others, the following materials have been published:

- “Come to the Festival, Festivals and religions of the world”, a learning material related to our interreligious calendar. It is a guide with wide information about the most relevant festivals of seven religious traditions (presented in alphabetic order) and also an extensive number of activities for students of secondary school. The book's main goals are to promote interreligious dialogue, to promote cultural diversity, to find common ground for peaceful coexistence, and to present different ways to celebrate the same topics.
- The “Vocabulary of religions for mass media”, the first Catalan dictionary with terminological information on religious traditions for media professionals. The vocabulary presents 1.283 terms related to religious studies, including related secular issues. .
- “Guidebook on religious diversity for the police services of Catalonia”. It represents different religious traditions through their public and social signs, including festivals, food, clothes, beliefs on death, names, etc. The book emphasizes some issues that polices services should take into account, such as worship places, public prayers and festivals, religious objects, etc.<sup>12</sup>

As it was the case with the promotion of interreligious dialogue, the development and dissemination of religious diversity educational materials aims at making religious diversity known and acknowledged, preparing future citizens for interaction and respect

of other religious (or non religious) options, assuring fairness in the treatment of all religious and convictional traditions, whether majority or minority, new or old, traditional or non traditional. By providing a balanced account of religion and its potential for social cohesion and peace, the materials developed intend to walk the fine line of *creative fidelity* to the different religious traditions it deals with, respecting traditions' self-understanding (and counting on it by having conspicuous members participate of its development), and favoring positive personal and communal appropriation of local diversity. Needless to say, if interreligious dialogue is going to expand and facilitate people's participation and active citizenship, it must count on an educational curricula on religious diversity that prepares people for it.

### III. Final words

Religious diversity in Europe is a fact, a reality we have denied in the past that we would do badly to deny again now. Its presence has been considered a source of conflict, but an approach that sees its potential for social cohesion (and that is capable of understanding its value dimension), must seek for alternatives to traditional approaches to religious diversity. Neither denial nor ignorance have resolved the issue, and since it is a long standing fact, the time for interreligious dialogue and cooperation and the fair and non confessional teaching of religion in schools has clearly come, definitely moving from diversity as a source of conflict to diversity as a potential for social cohesion and for the conception of an inclusive European citizenship.

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1 Quoted in Sandro Magister, "Europe Is Christian, but Turkey's Crescent Moon Shines in its Skies", available at [http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/chi\\_siamo?eng=y](http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/chi_siamo?eng=y) (May 2010)

2 "How the Immigrant has Become Muslim", in *Revue européenne des migrations internationales*, vol. 21 – n°2, 2005.

3 "Article 18 protects theistic, non-theistic and atheistic beliefs, as well as the right not to profess any religion or belief. The terms "belief" and "religion" are to be broadly construed. Article 18 is not limited in its application to traditional religions or to religions and beliefs with institutional characteristics or practices analogous to those of traditional religions. The Committee therefore views with concern any tendency to discriminate against any religion or belief for any reason, including the fact that they are newly established, or represent religious minorities that may be the subject of hostility on the part of a predominant religious community." General Comment No. 22: The right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion ( Art. 18) : 30/07/1993. paragraph 2

4 See, for instance, the denial of citizenship to a man with veiled wife in France ("France refuses a citizenship over full Islamic veil", <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8494860.stm>) and to a woman for use of the same veil ("France rejects veiled Muslim wife", <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7503757.stm>)

5 "[...]humankind's ambivalent attitude toward violence, sexuality, and other self-transcending powers reflects an awareness that both possibilities—life and death—reside within the holy ("the ambivalence of the sacred")." *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2000, pp. 29-30.

6 "The Study, Practice and Construction of Religion: The Case for Peacebuilding," in *Criterion*, vol. 43, Autumn 2004, p. 6, available on line at [http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/criterion/autumn\\_04.pdf](http://divinity.uchicago.edu/martycenter/publications/criterion/autumn_04.pdf)

7 After years of experimenting in the potential of interfaith dialogue for social cohesion, in 2007 the UNESCO Center of Catalonia launched the International Network on Religions and Mediation in Urban Areas, an initiative linked to the practice of mediation and conflict management, cultural and religious diversity and the culture of peace. The work is carried out in conjunction with local authorities, religious communities and mediation practitioners, and it involves different spheres of intervention. For more information on the project and on cities as key elements to this approach, see the Final Report of the International Congress on Religions and Cultural Diversity: Mediation Towards Social Cohesion in Urban Areas (Barcelona, December 18-20

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2006) available at [http://www.unescocat.org/religions-mediacio/publicacions/revista\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unescocat.org/religions-mediacio/publicacions/revista_eng.pdf)

8 The interfaith work initiated by the UNESCO Center of Catalonia and the UNESCO Association for Interreligious Dialogue in 2004 in a marginalized neighbourhood in Badalona opened the possibility for wider cooperation with the city municipality and later on with other townships around Catalonia. From June 2006, when an agreement was signed with City Council of Badalona to implement a Program of Citizen Dialogue between Beliefs and Convictions in Badalona, aiming to improve coexistence and preventing and managing possible conflicts in which religious communities can be involved, the Center's programs have included a variety of activities such as the creation and facilitation of interfaith dialogue groups (including specific youth and women groups), a series of panels about different aspects related to religious diversity and coexistence, the elaboration of a digital religious map of the city and other educational materials and resources, and the creation of a religious diversity resource center. The programs' founding principle is the right to freedom of religion and worship and the building up of constant relationships with religious communities of different traditions, with non-religious civil society organizations, and with staff and policy makers from local and Catalan administrations.

9 As stated above in reference to the general comment 22 to article 18, religion and belief are to be understood in a broad sense. In this regard, it is important to suspend our judgment regarding our own culture's conception of religion, or its different from so-called cults: as it has been said, the difference between a religion and a cult is... about 100 years (or religions are cults with political influence).

10 Interfaith groups have publicly manifested their support to neglected or discriminated minorities (particularly they have shown their support to Muslim communities in times of increasing islamophobia in Europe), as well as their common stance on moral issues such as the economical crisis or the need to lower gas emissions.

11 Jointly with the UNESCO Association for Interreligious Dialogue, the UNESCO Center of Catalonia has promoted the campaign "Religious Culture for tomorrow's citizens" (see [http://www.audir.org/index.php?option=com\\_docman&task=doc\\_view&gid=10](http://www.audir.org/index.php?option=com_docman&task=doc_view&gid=10) ) insisting on the implementation of a religious culture area in secondary schools. The Text has been presented to all parliamentary groups in Catalonia, to the main religious confessions, and to some members of the educational community as well. The Declaration accompanying the campaign has been presented to civic society through media, and several local personalities have adhered to it.

12 For a list of published materials on religious diversity, see <http://www.unescocat.org/en/resources/publications?ambit=9>