



The contribution of interreligious dialogue to participative democracy

On 21 March 2007, symbolically convened at the French National Parliament for its constitutive General Assembly, CIEUX undertook the mission of democratising interreligious dialogue. The CIEUX association (*Interreligious Committee for Universal Ethics and against Xenophobia*) proposes the organisation of local interreligious and secular dialogues. Its local action takes into account the area itself, the way people live there, and the public space. The meetings take place with the inhabitants of a neighbourhood and the different religious communities that have a place of worship there. CIEUX instigates dialogues, which give an opportunity to non-believers as well as believers to give their opinions and not only to senior representatives. In keeping with this ambition to democratise interreligious dialogue, CIEUX seeks to “democratise democracy”. Indeed, the action carried out by our association follows the movement inaugurated in the 1960s in favour of a participative democracy where citizens have much greater involvement. CIEUX is an opportunity for residents to dialogue with religious faithful and the representatives of places of worship, in a similar way to how neighbourhood councils and consultative committees are means of dialoguing with political, economical, social and cultural actors.

CIEUX does not in any way represent the local participative instances. The association describes situations, opinions and problems faced, and emphasises how they could be solved, but does not take any position. Its statutes stipulate “During their mandate, the elected members (directors, coordinators) of the CIEUX association have a duty to observe restraint with regard to the major topical issues likely to impact on the lives and/or management of religious and political institutions; the coordinators of a local CIEUX and those of partner communities have no public opinion to give in the name of the association, whether with regard to worship-related, political, economic, social or scientific questions, unless they receive the written request to do so from all the heads of communities participating in their local branch.” Therefore, CIEUX is not a decision-making forum. In this sense, the association is closer to a grassroots democratic movement than to participative democracy: CIEUX aims to give citizens a greater role in interreligious life, and not in the political life. CIEUX is involved in three missions of participative democracy in the interreligious field alone:

◆ *Open debates between local actors*

Before each interreligious dialogue, a preparative civic meeting, open to all, is organised. Believers and agnostics or atheists in good faith contribute all together to local active citizenship.

◆ *Inaugurating fraternal friendship*

CIEUX organises interreligious and local secular dialogues: these meetings are opportunities for people to get to know one another, building a more authentic, deep and durable coexistence. Those willing to take the experience further can meet again to share other experiences such as:

- sharing stories from their life journeys, collecting the testimonies of the older citizens, reading stories or poems, visiting places of worship, organising festive and sportive activities, artistic exhibitions, trips to twin countries or cities, sharing through activities such as cooking or sewing, promoting heritage, protecting the environment, fighting against loneliness, working on foreign languages, helping people in need, helping young people in their school choices, giving literacy help and classes, promoting public-spiritedness and diversity, educational actions on human rights and women’s rights, etc.



In exchange for giving, people get the satisfaction of contributing to doing good. In that way, interreligious and intercultural dialogue has a collective aspect and makes a significant contribution to the common good.

◆ *Seeking the common good*

In neighbourhoods, it is beneficial for residents and religious faithful to be associated in the elaboration of the common good. But they may have few opportunities to communicate together in local instances of participative democracy such as social centres, neighbourhood committees or community centres. This kind of civic dialogue with religious communities is often entrusted to elected representatives, to the representatives of the citizens, therefore to representative democracy. This situation brings about the double paradox that one can all too frequently observe in neighbourhoods: on the one hand, the local participative instances are not open to the religious communities, even though the common good is one of their missions. On the other hand, religious communities do not have dialogue with each other or with residents, and yet they aspire to building peace. Facing this double paradox, there came about a need to democratise participative democracy and interreligious dialogue.

Such a democratisation is a challenge that has to overcome obstacles, challenge conformism and do away with taboos. Many issues are at stake but so many positive outcomes are also possible:

◆ *A more efficient participative democracy*

Interreligious and intercultural dialogue improves the social engineering. Residents can share their questions, their wishes or their problems with people in charge of religious matters and with the municipal representatives of participative democracy: district council, neighbourhood council, local authorities, consultation and initiative committee, etc. Answers are proposed, so people are better informed quickly. In addition, the local elected representatives can rely on the cooperation of the heads of places of worship when they need their consultation.

◆ *Better integration*

Participative democracy seeks to correct the unwanted effects of representative democracy, which tends to privilege the elites. If the purpose of democracy is to give everyone a voice, then we can underline the fact that immigrants, those who have the greatest difficulty speaking their host country's language, are rarely present on district councils. The interreligious and secular dialogue seeks to amend for this situation or at least reduce the abovementioned perverse effect generated by participative democracy. By being united in dialogue, religious communities avoid – in the case of acts of xenophobia – being used as pretexts for persecutions, moral justification or scapegoats. These dialogues can protect against excesses, and can be used to create awareness and propose solutions. Their basis in cooperation emphasises the nature of their struggle for the public good, so that people may live together respectfully, taking into account their differences.

◆ *A broader social integration*

Local interreligious dialogue also favours social integration. Indeed, not only foreigners need to be integrated. The lack of social integration also affects people who have lost their job, house, spouse or friends: people who are in precarious situations and who are only marginally involved in the instances of participative democracy. Yet, these people often find a listening ear, respect and security within religious communities. Among believers in the places of worship, some of them feel lonely and have lost confidence in their ability to forge social links again. Their



community helps them to fulfil themselves. But, by dialoguing with one another, religious communities can also help people to fight against this feeling of social isolation. The faithful are all the more satisfied with their community in that it opens up a network that is a source of well-being, happiness, social recognition, better self-esteem and esteem for others. The religious community is this way a factor for a better social integration.

◆ *Drawing on everyone's contribution to achieve social peace*

With modern transport and telecommunications, the temptation is to only have a utilitarian attitude to neighbourhoods, without any reflection on the fact of living together. Furthermore, with globalisation, some communities have had to separate themselves from their countries of origin. Interreligious dialogue helps them to “re-territorialise” themselves. For it is not enough to live in the same space to feel close to one's neighbours. Immaterial borders come into play: culture, lifestyle, language, religion, etc. Spatial proximity does not guarantee social peace, but can, conversely, give rise to conflicts. Moreover, in neighbourhoods, religious communities, social centres and residents' committees face problems such as:

- employment, accommodation or family insecurity; loneliness;
- difficulty living with others, deterioration of social ties;
- lack of civic attitude;
- isolation in one's own community;
- social discriminations;
- acts of xenophobia, racism,
- violence.

Religious communities and neighbourhood residents have all one interest in mind: dealing with all the aforementioned problems and finding solutions to them. However, it is not enough to have common interests in order to have a common good. The collective interest, whether common or general, does not really drive action. While the common good is a long-term aim, common interest does not mobilise everybody. Each and every person is tempted to leave it to others to take care of it. The problem at the local level is that if one actor is not doing its job, the whole edifice easily collapses. The will to promote living-together therefore needs something more immediate, more personal and more interior than the common interest: a common desire, a desire that makes us reach out to others, has to be formulated. Our sense of trust is based on our sensitivity, our affectivity, our feelings. Feelings are what make us come closer, the feelings we can have for one another – friendship, respect, compassion, generosity. Hope, justice, joy and patience are all virtues that make us dialogue with others. Kindness, openness, efficiency, loyalty are all qualities of those who cooperate. Honesty, goodwill, solidarity, conviviality are the values that we can share together. Peace given in this way brings a sense of accomplishment for self and for others, which is the basis for a durable happiness. In a small way, each and everyone becomes the ambassador of that peace after achieving it. This is undoubtedly the most humble and fundamental contribution interreligious dialogue can make to participative democracy: a peace that is transmitted from one person to another.

Proximity alone does not create local ties but where dialogue, especially interreligious dialogue is maintained, proximity helps to build participative democracy. Democratizing interreligious dialogue is therefore a way to democratise democracy.

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