



C.I.E.U.X. : 10 positive outcomes

The C.I.E.U.X. association (Interreligious Committee for Universal Ethics and against Xenophobia) proposes the organization 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 neighborhood and the different religious communities that have a place of worship there. Many issues are at stake but so many positive outcomes are also possible!

1 - Democratize interreligious dialogue

C.I.E.U.X. instigates dialogues, which give an opportunity to non-believers as well as believers to give their opinions and not only to senior representatives.

Why did we find it necessary to universalise interreligious dialogue at the local level?

In France as well as elsewhere in Europe and on other continents, we observed that in neighbourhoods, places of worship located adjacent to each other generally do not engage in dialogue even though they are all dedicated to peace. Everyone seems resigned to accepting this situation as if it were a fatality or an established social practice, with nobody seeing any paradox or perverse effects in this. However, the absence of local dialogue between residents and the faithful of religious communities is not socially neutral. We find instead that the absence of dialogue accentuates a number of problems. For example:

- communalism
- the deterioration of social ties
- xenophobic acts against places of worship, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, Christianophobia, etc.
- discrimination based on origins and religion
- bias against others that is amplified by the media

In keeping with this ambition to democratize interreligious dialogue, C.I.E.U.X. seeks to "democratize democracy".

2 –“Democratize the democracy”

The action carried out by our association follows the movement inaugurated in the 1960s in favor of a participative democracy where citizens have much greater involvement. C.I.E.U.X. is an opportunity for residents to dialogue with religious faithful and the representatives of places of worship, in a similar way to how neighborhood councils and consultative committees are means of dialoguing with political, economical, social and cultural actors. C.I.E.U.X. does not in any way represent the local participative instances. The association describes situations, opinions and problems faced, and emphasizes how they could be solved, but does not take any position. Its statutes stipulate “During their mandate, the elected members (directors, coordinators) of the C.I.E.U.X. 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 C.I.E.U.X. 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, C.I.E.U.X. is not a decision-making forum. In this sense, the association is closer to a grassroots democratic movement than to participative democracy: C.I.E.U.X. aims to give citizens a greater role in interreligious life, and not in the political life. C.I.E.U.X. is involved in three missions of participative democracy in the interreligious field alone: open debates between local actors, inaugurating fraternal friendship and seeking the common good.

3 - Open dialogues between local actors

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

4 - Inaugurating fraternal friendship

C.I.E.U.X. organizes 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, organizing 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.

5 - Seeking the common good

In local neighborhoods, 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 centers, neighborhood committees or community centers. 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 neighborhoods: 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 democratize participative democracy and interreligious dialogue. Such a democratization is a challenge that has to overcome obstacles, challenge conformism and do away with taboos.

6 - Improve the social engineering

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, neighborhood 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.

7 - 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 emphasizes the nature of their struggle for the public good, so that people may live together respectfully, taking into account their differences.

8 - A broader social integration

Local interreligious dialogue also favors 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 fulfill 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. Therefore, C.I.E.U.X. encourages local inter-generational dialogue between residents and community faithful living in the same neighbourhood. The goal is to encourage the emergence of social ties between young people and older people (including isolated senior citizens) by establishing dialogue between believers of different religions and non-believers. Senior citizens are called on to contribute their point of view through these encounters that constitute new spaces of sociability. Those involved contribute to forging a community life in which traditions, wisdom and the experience they convey, are the building blocks of social harmony.

9 - “re-territorialize” the interreligious dialogue

With modern transportation and telecommunications, the temptation is to only have a utilitarian attitude to neighborhoods, without any reflection on the fact of living together. Furthermore, with globalization, some communities have had to separate themselves from their countries of origin. Interreligious dialogue helps them to “re-territorialize” themselves. For it is not enough to live in the same space to feel close to one’s neighbors. 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 neighborhoods, religious communities, social centers and residents’ committees face problems such as: employment, accommodation or family insecurity; loneliness, difficulty living with others...

Religious communities and neighborhood 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.

10 - Drawing on everyone’s contribution to achieve social peace

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 mobilize 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 democratize democracy.

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Alexandre Vigne, Community-based interreligious dialogue : an urgent task for Democracy, Paris, Publisud, 2013, 112 p.