

## Connecting with Others - Practising the Art of Dialogue

### 17 June 2023

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#### DialogUE Project

On 17 June 2023, New Humanity, in partnership with the UCOII (Union of Islamic Communities of Italy), promoted an online workshop that aimed to create an appropriate platform where the topic of media disinformation, fake news, polarisation and Islamophobia could be addressed in depth and freely by communication experts from both sides. Catholics and Muslims already engaged in interreligious dialogue gave credibility to the importance of interreligious dialogue by sharing their personal and collective testimonies.

The workshop entitled 'Connecting with Others' had 365 registrations from 21 European and 31 non-European countries, with followings in English, Italian, German and French.

#### Summary of workshop content

Three invited speakers, experts in the above-mentioned themes, expounded the topics followed by six others, Christians and Muslims who gave their testimonies of good practices. between Catholics and Muslims.

The first speaker was **Mr. Luciano di Mele**, Italian, doctor in Communication. He presented the themes of disinformation, fake news and polarization showing through examples how an oral or written communication can be manipulated and distorted, highlighting the danger of the hegemonic power of the media. With the phenomenon of digitization though everyone becomes an actor of communication this increases the probability of false information. The topic of fake news raised the participants' awareness to such problems. A strong call for media education from the bottom up was stressed which is a new form of civic literacy. Such literacy promotes freedom of expression and at the same time safeguards against disinformation.

The second speaker was **Mr. Ramazan Özgü**, Swiss, Muslim professor, who highlighted the importance of the minority voices in majority spaces, the importance of dialogue as a platform for public debate. Muslims should be involved in conversations related to their religiosity and culture. There are yet

too many structural barriers, social systems, linguistic and institutional prejudices that hinder Muslim participation. Muslims need to be strengthened in their empowerment. The European community should create a more inclusive public discourse for Muslims and other minorities.

Interreligious dialogue among Catholics and Muslims is a platform that can break down stereotypes and foster comprehension between the parties, contributing to a more inclusive society and a strong democracy.

The Focolare Movement dialogical methodology, based on active listening, respect, empathy, charity and service has contributed to the improvement of relations and the integration of Muslim refugees in several European countries. Interreligious dialogue is important to promote integration and build self-confidence. The dialogical method of communication promotes understanding, acceptance and openness to the "other".

Mr. Ramazan supports the Swiss government initiative called "We Are Also Here" that focuses on empowering Muslim youth by giving them the skills to work with the media, engage with political figures and actively contribute to their communities. It focuses on active citizenship. Muslims have the opportunity to raise their voices, share their perspectives and actively shape public discourse and it is a positive step for the participatory democracy.

The speaker stressed the value of alliances between minority groups, such as Muslims and Jews, to fight against discrimination. Another initiative, the "Respect project" promotes shared values and mutual understanding helping overcome hate on the internet.

A positive step in this direction is the European Union's Digital Services Act (DSA) an EU legislation that aims to democratise the digital landscape by requiring greater transparency and accountability, particularly in the area of targeted advertising and recommender systems. The provisions allow users to understand why they see certain content, fostering a more informed and discerning digital citizenry. Laws such as the DSA help shape a more equitable digital sphere, protecting minority interests and ensuring that social media enhances, rather than undermines democratic dialogue, diminishing hate speech and cyberbullying. This law is an example of why the EU's role in the digital public sphere is so important.

As societies become increasingly digital, regulation must ensure that digital platforms are equitable and accessible, allowing for fair representation of all groups, and protect against misinformation and discrimination. Through these efforts, we can move towards a society where every voice, regardless of religion or ethnicity, is heard, valued and contributes to a robust, flourishing democracy.

The vital essence of democratic societies is dialogue, which requires the courage and willingness to cross boundaries, to understand and move beyond entrenched positions. The democratic process relies on open conversations with a variety of stakeholders and requires an environment conducive to open and respectful conversation. Interfaith dialogue serves as an invaluable platform that promotes the free exchange of ideas, beliefs and life experiences, thereby fostering mutual understanding and cooperation among different religious groups.

The third speaker was **Mr. Michele Zanzucchi**, Italian, who discussed the topic of islamophobia that created fear in Europe due to the complexity of the relationship between Europe and the Eastern Islamic world. Europe see islamophobia as a political struggle, but the Arab world see it primarily as a cultural and religious problem. The West feels threatened by Islam, and it is mainly ignorance that makes islamophobia grow. We don't have time to get proper information and journalists do not have adequate training making historical, theological and anthropological errors about Islam. Another fundamental error of journalism is not to verify the origin of the news.

While reminding us that there is also christianophobia, the speaker offered two main antidotes: getting used to mutual listening by seeking to know and understand each other and consider religion as an important tool to help overcome conflicts. The problem is not in the religion itself, but in its misinterpretation and radicalization.

Gerti Kilgert and Müzeyyen, Germans, spoke about a breakfast initiative between Christians, Muslims and Jewish women, where they discuss their faith in connection with daily life. The guideline of this gatherings is the Golden Rule and a "decatalogue of dialogue" that they formulated. Such instruments help them to open their hearts, perceive the treasure of the other, look at common points of their religions.

Stijn Lievens, Belgian, anthropologist and Catholic religion teacher, talked about an intercultural buffet dinner organised at his school in favour of the victims of the earthquakes in Turkey and Syria.

Kaoutar Tahere, Muslim woman of Moroccan origin, living in Belgium, shared an experience on islamophobia and identity. She stressed that dialogue is the basis of every healthy relationship and that a person must train himself/herself to live in the present multicultural reality. The spirituality of the Focolare Movement which is centred in fraternity and unity has helped her in this.

Rafa El Raoui, a Muslim woman of Syrian origin, living in Brussels, shared how she was able to face a cancer with the closeness of the Focolare friends. "They put into practice what I have learned in my faith, namely that one cannot live alone".

Rossana Di Fede, Italian, recounted meetings in Perugia to overcome misinformation and mistrust. The solidarity and close relationship with an Imam's family helped them overcome the great suffering of his departure.

An online group meeting section followed, where the participants shared their points of view on the main topics of the workshop and elaborated two principles and three proposals which were presented to the assembly and further elaborated. The output is stated below.

**The participants then identified two principles and three concrete proposals to put into practice:**

### **Two principles**

#### **Reciprocity and dialogue: a two-way lane of sincere communication**

An authentic dialogue requires:

To welcome differences with open-mindedness, respect and sincere mutual listening as the basis

for authentic relationships of equality.

To be a credible witness of one's faith, knowing well one's unique identity.

To communicate responsible information,

To foster critical thinking and express in accordance with the European guidelines for media

information.

To be educated with true and accurate information and knowledge about Christianity and Islam, as well as other religions, diverse cultures, political and social realities, in order to break down stereotypes and misinformation and to build mutual trust.

### **Fraternity: we are all part of a world community**

To educate and form Catholics and Muslims, especially the younger generation, according to the Golden Rule, a sentence present in most of the main world religions, which expresses the principle of treating others as one wants to be treated and where the dignity and value of the human person are highly considered and respected.

When people are placed on the same level, with the same rights and duties, fraternity, solidarity and active citizenship become a reality and a truly democratic society can emerge. Fraternity makes us all part of the same family, eradicating fear, hatred, division, mistrust, disinformation and polarisation. Fraternity increases personal and collective responsibility, and thus transparency, cooperation and equal development.

### **Three proposals**

Get to know the different social, intercultural and interreligious realities of the territory and establish a sincere pluralistic dialogue with people belonging to different communities. Encourage interaction between them through social meetings and activities that promote openness, respect, knowledge, friendship and mutual trust. Reach out to community leaders and create a network for the proper channelling of information.

Small is beautiful! Start with small activities, on a personal and collective level. Examples: personal level: greet Muslims; get correct information about their faith; do not discriminate against differences... Collective level: women's meetings, interfaith round tables, football matches, family picnics, walking and praying for peace together, ecological initiatives, participating in each other's main festivals, reciprocal visits to places of worship, local councils that bring together leaders of different religious communities.

To educate Catholic and Muslim youth and adults in human rights, inter-religious dialogue, religious identity, freedom of existence in the public sphere

and free and responsible expression in the media. Professional educators to establish school curricula that educate students' consciences to the high European values without bias. Government officials to create transversal initiatives that bring together Catholics and Muslims (and other religious actors) for the benefit of civil sectors. Catholic and Muslim communities to deepen their own religious roots to ensure a genuine practice without signs of proselytism.

To give greater visibility to testimonies of good practice of Catholics and Muslims in living with respect for each other, their faith and culture, using radio, newspapers, television and social media. Use all means of communication to educate, impart knowledge and promote a culture of peace and fraternity among religious diversity, as opposed to the culture of greed, corruption, misinformation and war.

Disseminate the two project initiatives of the Swiss Government: "We Are Here Too", which gives a voice to minorities, and "Respect Project", which accepts others as they are, in order to achieve greater trust, genuine communication and appreciation.